Among Wild Birds and their Haunts

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By A Son of the Marshes

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WITHIN AN HOUR OF LONDON TOWN

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AMONG WILD BIRDS AND THEIR HAUNTS

Visger, Mrs Jean Allen (Pinder) Owen.

BY

A SON OF THE MARSHES

AUTHOR OF 'ANNALS OF A FISHING VILLAGE,'
'ON SURREY HILLS,' ETC.

EDITED BY

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SECOND EDITION

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON
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WITHIN AN HOUR OF LONDON TOWN.

CHAPTER I.

HAUNTS OF THE FERN OWL.

OFTEN heard, but little seen, is the strong-winged, large-eyed, wide-mouthed night-swallow, or fern owl. Here and there you will see him in the course of your evening rambles; but to find his stronghold and hunting-ground you must range far afield.

Out of the town of Dorking along green lanes, a good walk will bring you to Leith Hill, and thence to the common. The sun is high up yet, and as we wish to find our owl in his night haunts first, we have plenty of time to look about us. Skirt the bog covered with cotton-grass and rushes.

"Gock," "Gock-whir," there goes a blackcock; they breed here near water-pools on the highest part of the land in the hot summer weather. Wild ducks rear their young here also; the cottagers find the mother and ducklings in the dipholes sometimes when they go for water in the early morning. Poultry they keep on the hills, but not ducks. "Snakes?" Yes, large ones too. No fear of treading on one, they are off like a flash; any one not accustomed to them would wonder what that shining streak meant. Butterflies of many kinds are flitting about here and there and everywhere. Prominent from the others by their flight are the strong-winged fritillaries.

Now, from the common through the woods, we reach the moor. Up through firs, their trunks blazing red in the sunlight, another mile, and we are on the camp ground, rightly so named, for on it are the traces of a Roman fortress. In a line from this is Farleigh, dearly beloved by the antiquarian community for the treasures it has given them.

Fern owls, not Roman coins or vases, are what we have come in search of. But look round, before

the light leaves, at the firs, mile after mile of them; rough ground and heather of two kinds — pale pink and purple. Furze, ferns, and whortleberry bushes, knee-high. Bushels of fruit have the children gathered; the birds, too, have their bills stained deep purple. Plenty there are for all, and to spare.

We near our resting-place, the low mounds in front, which are the refuse from stone quarries that have been worked and left many years ago. Summer and winter have done their work in crumbling the stones. The dew blackberry, mixed with tufts of wiry grass, covers the surface. Exposed to the full blaze of the sun all day, you can feel a warmth from them at night, hot as this evening is. Moths congregate here, with other flying things; the fern owls also. Our feet touch something on the green sheep-track, the remains of a blackcock: and up from the ferns a few steps further on springs a large grey bird, which has just finished his supper. He looks like a gull, but is the full-plumaged male hen-harrier.

Chur, chur, chur—chur. The first rattling of the fern owl. It is answered from twenty different

quarters. It is their dinner signal; they have fashionable customs, and dine late. Here they come, the whole place is alive with them. With the exception of the hitting of the back of the wings together at times, like a pigeon, their flight is noiseless. "Chur" and "squeak," they are in full work now. The different flights of the moths cause the bird to tumble and dart in a very peculiar way. Some moths fly straightly, others archwise; the skip-jacks vandyke about; that clip of the owl's wing when he seems to tumble hits the moth down; the return stroke from the other wing brings him alive into his enemy's mouth.

We do not intend going home before morning breaks. The heather makes a good couch on a pinch; and if you want a pillow pull up a good armful of the frieze moss, which is all round about. It is light enough to read, almost, and it is warm; what more could any one want? The scent from the fir-trees is enough to make you feel glad to be alive; the heather gives its share, so do other small things. We doze a little but wake up with a start, for the ground seems to shake. Two or three of the fern owls have settled close to us, and are having a

concert. "Chur-er-er-chur" to any amount, while overhead you can see them tumbling, wheeling, and diving like a flock of pigeons. The fern owl is not a shy bird in his proper home; he will fly round your head or settle within six feet of you if you keep quiet and let him alone.

A slight rustle, and on looking down some small creature is seen moving close to our resting-place, a toad of aldermanic girth. He is going home. A very lucky thing for him that the creature who picks him up is not on entomological thoughts intent, or the "bee-snapping Gabriel" would have a rap on the noddle, and his stomach be turned out next into a basin of water. For a collector of rare and valuable specimens of the beetle tribe is the toad.

It is noon, and we are slowly walking over the tops of the stone-heaps near our resting-place of last night. Flitting over the stones and running on them are legions of the insect tribe. Lizards are there, for a better feeding-ground you could not find; the common heath lizard, and now and then a specimen of the green species; not an escaped Jersey lizard, mind you.

One continual hum—there is no other word for it —sounds all round you. Insect-life is in full swing in the air and on the ground.

And now for the haunt of the fern owl by day. Keep the green sheep-track. There is a nearer way through that long stretch of whortle-bushes—here called hurts—but vipers are numerous and remarkably active. We have found that out long ago; the colour of burnt sienna, with black markings, they are, here. If they do not hurt you, you might hurt them, poor things. If you accidentally put your foot on one of them it gives you a turn, that curl round the leg. The boys are very clever in catching vipers with a cleft stick.

In the short space of a mile you will find, if you look, three kinds of the same species—red with black markings, among the whortle-bushes; bronze-green and black markings, under the fir-trees; bronze-red, on the sandstone littered with dead bramble-leaves.

Now we clear the fir-wood. Look up the long valley in front, three miles in length: the sides are covered with junipers of every size, from splendid specimens that would ornament the grounds of a prince, if he could get them to flourish, down to little

beauties that would go in a flower-pot. Down the whole stretch runs a little stream, in places only a foot wide, in which there are splendid trout, for it is not the quantity but the quality of the water which makes them thrive. Where a water-rat can live a trout will get fat if the water is suitable.

Not a sound is to be heard, saving a tinkling sheep-bell. It is very hot, the very firs seem to be asleep. Mind where you place your feet, for the fern owl breeds on these sunny slopes.

Flip! the bird has gone. Look on the bare stones where a rabbit in play has scratched the thin fine turf off, forming a slight hollow.

On a bit of dead fern and a blade or two of withered grass lie two beautiful eggs, marbled over in a way which matches the surroundings, to a degree that sends you off in a brown study. Pick them up, you cannot find them very often, and if you left them for a little while the bird would come back, and taking them one at a time she would carry them away in her capacious mouth and place them elsewhere. Quick! Where shall we put them so that they may be safe until we return? We have it. Close by, on a drooping juniper-branch, is a chaf-

finch's nest. Pick up a little of that velvet-like moss, wrap the eggs in it, and place them carefully in the nest. Now we can jog on.

Up we go to gain the moor. On a bare space, over which the dewberry trails here and there, and bits of peat and fir-twigs lie scattered amongst fragments of red stone, — from under our very feet as it seems, "Flip, flip, flip," and a squeak, and two birds rise and drop again in the heath. Fern owls they are; stand quiet, they have young close to you. Crawl under that large juniper, where the boughs sweep the ground. We have not long to wait. Here they come and settle close to what looks like a bit of stone with a patch or two of yellowish grey lichen on it, and a dead leaf by the side. All at once the seeming stone and dead leaf move and prove to be two young fern owls. Leaving your hiding-place you go to look at them, the parents tumbling about the while near you. There they squat, two blinking, gaping, noodling lumps of fluff.

Taking one in our hand, it winks, opens its mouth and then noodles down in the hand, sleepy. After a good look at the young Evejars—as the children call them—we leave them to grow and prosper.

CHAPTER II.

DRIFT.

A COTTAGE in which I had my lodging for some time, was close to a stream. After the work of the day was over I often sat outside till late in the night, when all was quiet around, save the nightingale that sang close to me, his whole heart thrown into his sobbing song. There was a little fall in the stream, caused by the broken branch of a tree and a few large stones—a little tinkling fall, which you would not notice by day, because of the songs of the birds; but at night, the sound of the water, and the voice of that solitary singer fell on my ears by turns. Water running over stones has, at night, notes that make one wonder. There is a rise and a fall: a succession of murmurs, sometimes very

low, sometimes louder. And now and again these notes seemed to mingle and harmonise with those of the bird.

On the wall of this home, in the leafy heart of the woodlands, a bunch of sea-weed hung as a weather-gauge; a few shells picked from the beach ornamented the mantelshelf; a sea-gull stood in solitary state in a glass case. The good old dame with whom I lodged—"Mother" she was always styled—would tell you they were brought to her by one of her "gals as lived in sarvice near the sea." And as I looked at them, I felt that I, like them, was drift from Longshore.

It was a well-built old English thatched cottage, the front covered with roses and honeysuckle, standing in a good old-fashioned garden. In the borders were stocks, carnations, sweet-williams, and between the hives splendid white lilies. The leaves of these, preserved in spirits, form the universal remedy for all cuts and bruises that affect the household. Or, if the cut be only slight, a bruised leaf from the geranium stops bleeding; homely remedies, but good ones. A thick privet hedge closes the garden from the common; beyond are the firs.

Chipsey-wee-wee-wee! A little bluetit settles on the entrance to the master's beehive. Two taps with his bill bring out a bee to see what is the matter. He soon finds out. Chip! and off Master Bluehead goes. If a charge of shot did not stop him he would thin the hive out. Presently out comes a toad.

"What do I kill 'em for?" says the master. "Do good, do they? You'd say so if you kept bees! Artful ain't no name for their moves; they just scrapes a hole with their paws, and lays there quiet if anybody is about—right in front of the hive, mind you! When all is still he just gets on them hind-feet o' his and opens his mouth, and them there bees go slap into it! He can't help it? I thinks, master, you'd be very fond o' toads, you would, if you kept bees!"

I have seen "Bee-snapping Gabriel,"[1] as they

[1] "Bee-snapping Gabriel" is a very old local Surrey name for the toad. The sounds which come from a mixed flight of white-fronted and Bernicle geese, high up in the air, in stormy weather, which is like that of a pack of hounds in full cry, is also called "gabble retchet"; and the local idea is that the sound always forebodes death and misfortune. "Gabriel's hounds!" or "The hell-hounds are on the hunt!" the old crones mutter, as they cower over their cottage fires on wild, stormy nights.

call him, lie covered with only the eyes to be seen, and then rise suddenly bolt-upright on them hind-feet o' his. Swallows, too, like bees, and all the large moths, the hawk tribe particularly, will force an entrance into the hive, if possible, to feed on the honey. You can tell by the commotion amongst the bees when they are inside.

Night has come, the humming-bird hawk-moth has paid his visits in the heat of the day; the hotter it is the better he likes it. We take a small bull's-eye lantern and walk quietly round the hives. A hum; another and another. In front of the lilies something shines before you like moving emeralds. They are the eyes of the privet hawk-moth. By gently moving the light you can see his long trunk at work.

We will have no net banging about. Here is a bit of bark that has been ripped from the stem of a fir—the very thing for us. Procuring a cup of honey from our good old landlady, we coax a mug of that most extra cider beyond compare from the master. We mix some of it with the honey, smear it on the bark, and leave this near the hives. The master grins, and asks, "What

game are you up to now?" After supper, he is told, we will show him.

Supper over, we go out again. On the bark, dazed and incapable, are privet-moths with crimson under-wing, a lime-hawk, and two enormous grey slugs.

A pair of very bright eyes catch the light. On looking we see our old friend Bee-snapping Gabriel, reared up on his hind-feet. He has not come to imbibe, but to eat the insects that cover the bark.

With our captures and a muttered "Well, well, of all the capers that ever I seed played," from the master, we retire to rest.

The next day the mistress is informed confidentially that I am "a mortal curious customer; no harm in him, though, Dame."

I have never had any desire, as yet, to leave my own country; here my lot has been cast, and here lies my work; but I have often thought that if any one had a longing for the emigrant's wild, free life, he need only visit our Surrey highlands in the winter time, and pitch his tent in their most populated parts—say, the Redlands, Leith Hill, or Holmbury. Or, if these are too populous, let him

make tracks for Farleigh Heath, Black Down, or Hind Head. He need not go to the backwoods of America for isolation and loneliness; the possession of land is another matter. In my wanderings I have often come upon habitations, where men lived and died, that were far from coming up to the level of a backwoodsman's hut.

During weeks of enforced leisure I indulge in long ramblings on the moors, and in the woodlands, during one of which I was lost for a time in a blinding snowstorm. As a rule, I like best to wander alone, but I honestly confess "Number Two" would have been welcome on that occasion. All day I had been on the look-out for wild things, with very little result; for they knew what was coming, and they were hugging shelter very closely. Snow had fallen on the previous day. About four o'clock in the afternoon, masses of snow-clouds showed up, driven by the wind from the South coast. The wind soon rose to a hurricane, and the snow travelled with it. There, on a portion of the high-lands, I was fairly caught in it. Fortunately I got in a well-known track; but it was as much as I could do to keep in it—staggering along, blinded with snow

and wind, no house or living creature near. Somehow I managed to dash into the fir-woods, where I could see better. But the wind caught the tops of the firs, which were loaded with snow, and bent and twisted the trunks till they snapped and fell, splintered like matchwood. The wind rushed, howled, and groaned through them, bending the great stems like so many fishing-rods, and the ground at their roots heaved up and sank again as if an earthquake was taking place. It was grander than any organ recital, in its own wild way; but it was as dangerous as it was fine.

What strange memories and similes flash across our minds, taking us from the sublime to the ridiculous! Although I felt the greatest anxiety to be safely out of reach of the storm when the wind snapped the great trunks, leaving their tops a mass of ribbon-like splinters, they reminded me of the little wooden mops we laboured industriously to make, as children at school, by chewing pieces of stick, which, when ready, we used to dip in ink, and with them ornament the too clean pinafore of some other good little boy. This mischievous piece of schoolboy's fun, though from that day to this I had

never thought of it, came back to me, a grey-haired man as I looked at the havoc made on the fir-tops by the storm.

I cleared out of the wood, and managed to stagger on four miles farther, until I reached shelter, thoroughly exhausted, though I can stand as rough work as most men.

Perched on a topmost twig, with his breast to the wind, the missel-thrush sings. There he is, swayed to and fro by the high winds, as he sings his bold song to his mate who is somewhere close at hand. Although it blows hard, and the cold rain-drops hit you smartly in the face like sleet, it is the best time to listen to his song; the rougher the wind and the colder the rain, the louder he sings.

The wind drops, the rain ceases, and the shout of the storm-cock stops for a time—his is a song of bold defiance. In its place you hear now the song-thrush, a softer singer. There he sits, about midway up the tree, on the end of one of the outside branches, singing to his mate below. She has her nest in the stem of a stunted tree, about two feet from the ground, close to primroses, wild irises, and wood-anemones. Often have I watched her when

she was sitting there on her eggs, the dark eyes of the bird looking up into mine all the while.

There was a time, before I knew better, when I thought the gun was necessary to make a man acquainted with wild creatures; but the destructive spirit has left me now—both gun and fishing-rod have been laid aside. They are very good things in their way too, and to naturalist sportsmen the public are indebted for the authentic information of the present day. It must be remembered that wild animals and birds are not shot or captured easily; so if the sportsman watches and studies the ways and means of the creatures he is in search of—as he must do if he hopes for success—the public reap the benefit of his observations. Men and women are carnivorous too, and fish, flesh, and fowl well cooked are very acceptable to most people. I did once know a man well, who anathematised all sportsmen; he was no worshipper of Nature. Yet he was a true belly-worshipper. Fishing he regarded as sinful and the essence of cruelty, but he dearly loved a well-cooked salmon. He posed as a philanthropist, and sent tin plates and pinafores out to the South Sea Islanders; but the poor man shooting a rabbit

for his children's dinner was outside the pale of his sympathies.

But I am drifting from my subject. To come back to our wild hillsides. Evening is near at hand; warm showers have fallen at intervals all through the day, alternating with sunshine. Just now the sun is low down, gently sinking; the rain has ceased, but the drops glitter everywhere, rainbow-tinted. The trees, with their young foliage and yet unopened buds, look as if they were covered with precious stones, flashing in the light from the setting sun. Look where you will there is a mass of glittering, changing colour. It has been what the rustics call "a growin' day, you ken actually see things growin'!" It is good and healthful to stand in the midst of all this growth, and to inhale the smell of the earth, and the scent of the woodlands.

The linnets pass overhead, as we stand still for a while; they are giving out their last twitters before settling in the furze for the night. Furze-chats flicker on the tips of the furze-bushes, with their heads to the setting sun; chack! chack! chacking their good-night before the orb finally disappears

from sight. A pair or two of whin-chats, or stone-chats, go through the same ceremony. And now the black-coated flute-players of the woods strike up, singing their full-toned hymn of praise as the sun goes down. Whilst we listen to the rich notes of yon blackbirds, a line of that hymn we sang so lustily in our childhood comes back to us—

"Praise Him all creatures here below."

These senseless creatures of the woods, as some would call them, who do that without our bidding, might well rebuke man for his forgetfulness. Sun-worshippers some would call the birds; but they surely praise the Power that makes the sun to shine. They hail him before he rises with their early hymns; thousands and thousands of glad voices, fresh and clear; and they sing, without telling, their vesper song. The lark begins his in the morning before we can see any sun; but the bird high up in the air can see it. At early dawn and late in the evening, his joyous music will make some of us feel it is a good thing to live.

In an out-of-the-way spot, completely off the the beaten track, I once stumbled on a long strip

of glade between two hills, the sides of which were covered with firs — a place where the black game sported and crooned. There, in a rustic-looking dwelling, I found a grim-looking man whose upright carriage and face clean shaven—save for the grey moustache—told that he had known military service. He was well on in years, but they had not weighed heavily on him. He told me he had served as a sergeant in the early Kaffir wars; that he had been wounded and left for dead on the field, but recovered, thanks to his good natural constitution. Having been discharged with a pension, he had married a young wife and settled down in this out-of-the-way nook. A number of children were scuttling about in the brake and underwood, as merry as larks. He said he was well contented in the prospect of ending his days, and resting, where he then was. They had a cow, poultry, and a good garden; a stream of the purest water ran close to their door; what more could they desire? he asked.

In another of my rambles, I found a man digging stone. That and woodcutting are the usual occupations of any you may chance to come across in

most of these wilds. Tall and gaunt he was, over six feet high, with dark eyes and hair, apparently in the prime of life. His return greeting told me he hailed from Scotland.

The offer of tobacco proving acceptable, he and I sat down on the side of his overturned barrow, and settled down for a talk.

"You are not a native of this part of the country, I fancy?" he remarked, giving me a keen look.

"No; like you, I have drifted this way—not so far from home as yourself, though."

We soon found congenial topics for conversation; his speech and manners showed he had once led a very different life from his present one. Christopher North, Wilson the great American ornithologist, Burns, and the Ettrick Shepherd we discussed pleasantly together.

He had been head-forester on some estate in Scotland, he told me; had shot the red deer and the eagle, the seal too, and caught the salmon in the far North. The Bass Rock with its host of sea-birds he had been very familiar with, when catching gannets—"gants," he called them. He had springed "tammy nories" or puffins in plenty,

and taken the eggs of the scart or cormorant for the gentry to eat. (I have a book in my possession which states that the Greenlanders refuse to eat these; but the writers of books are not always to be relied on.)

From his native mountains and straths the man had come to this southern county as head-keeper; but his determined course and straightforward honesty had only made enemies for him; false tongues found a too ready listener in the gentleman who had tempted him away from his own country, and he had lost his situation. Just now, for want of something better to do, he was digging stone.

Another specimen of "drift" I came across in the shape of a sailor, who had anchored amongst these hills. He had served in the Naval Brigade, and seen some rough work.

At the top of one of the highest hills, in a mere hut of the roughest description, standing on a little clearing surrounded by firs, a solitary keeper lived with his dog. Magnificent scenery lay all about, but none shared the sight with him; the sun rose and set on his loneliness. Yet he told me he did not in the least mind that, only when the storms

roared through the trees, and the branches rubbed and crunched upon the roof of his hut, he felt it to be rather dreary. He had been married, but his wife was dead when I knew him. He must once have been wonderfully strong and active to judge from his appearance; his bearing was still full of vigour. The New Forest was well known to him, every part of it. He was in and on it before the order to destroy the deer was given; he had shot them in his official capacity. When the railway was in course of construction, scores of them, he said, were killed by poachers; and when the line was completed and in full working order, the deer would get on it and were run into like sheep. I asked him if he knew Grantley Berkeley.

"Knew him? Yes, I should think I did; knew him well, and his bloodhound Druid. He was ordered to kill 'em all off, was Grantley. What he said he meant, did Grantley. Folks round about couldn't make him out, nor his ways either; but he had lots o' good qualities about him, I knew that."

Then we talked of the salmon, and the number of otters, and the great size they reached. "No wonder," he said; "they fed well." Many a fine otter

had he taken from the traps. I spoke of the flesh-eating propensities of the animal. "Ah," he said, "do you know that you are the first one I've come across that believed it? Why, when I have told people I have seen a great dog-otter take a rabbit from his seat, catch him like a dog does, and lope off with him to his hold under the roots of trees in the river, they have laughed at me and thought I was lying."

"'Tis true enough," I rejoined; "and the otter will have other things besides rabbits—birds too and poultry, when he can get at them. Being caught in the act is surely proof enough."

However, natural history is advancing in the right direction; children's publications of the present day might be well substituted for some of the old standard works, full of mythical humbug, that have reached a third and fourth edition. As the keeper went on to observe, some animals that were supposed to eat only flesh, will eat vegetables and fruit; the badger, for instance, and the otter too, at times. The marten, which is eminently carnivorous, will eat fruit, raspberries in particular.

Snipe, he said, he had watched, and had found

the nests of both snipe and woodcock. Referring again to the Honourable Grantley Berkeley, he said the simple rustics wondered at him and his ways; his influence over birds and animals appeared to them little short of magic. They said "outlandish things follered him about; they seed wild creatures come and feed out of his hand."

His power with them was truly marvellous. I will not say that because a man loves all wild things he comes up to the Exeter Hall standard of a good man; but this I do aver, that a man who loves the beings created to take their place in the same world with himself, cannot be a bad one. A most kind and considerate man Grantley Berkeley was; and as a sportsman and naturalist, second to none; he claimed the respect and admiration of all who knew him. He, too, has drifted away, beyond our ken.

Some day we trust a still brighter light will shine on the true relation that the dumb creatures — as canting ignorance has styled them — bear to the so-called lords of creation; brutes we might often more fitly style these latter.

CHAPTER III.

BIRDS OF NIGHT.

"WHAT you can find to look at in that lot of varmints beats me. You may look at 'em for a week if it's any good to you. I wish there wasn't so many of 'em, I do. All that lot's bin killed this year. That one you seem most struck with was knocked over last autumn."

Half to myself, I mutter, "Poor things! not much harm have you done."

"What! you mean to say a good word for them owls? Surely, man alive! you must be going daft."

"I do; and what's more, if this estate belonged to me, not one of these birds should be spread-eagled out here."

"Well, all I can say, Mr Whoever-you-are, is,

you don't know nothing about it. They're varmints. Owls or hawks, or nothing of that sort never did any good nor never will; but you can look at 'em, and keep on lookin' at 'em. You won't get any good out of that lot." These were the sentiments on the whole family of raptores—birds of prey—which the keeper shared with nearly all of his calling.

As a field naturalist, I will pass over the eagle and snow owls—they are rare visitors to England, their home being in other lands—and will try to give some description, from personal observation, of the members of the owl tribe more commonly found in this country.

The sun has gone down, leaving an after-glow which throws a flood of soft light over the landscape. The old farmhouse and buildings, surrounded by large elms, are enveloped in a purple haze, which affords much enjoyment to the lover of nature, whose reverie is undisturbed. Silence is only broken by the tinkling of distant sheep-bells and the occasional barking of the shepherds' dogs. With measured flapping flight, out from the farm comes the beautifully buff-marked, white-breasted,

dark-eyed barn owl, with his curious elongated, almost heart-shaped face. He is now overhead, and you can hear his hissing scream as he passes into the meadows, where he works the fields like a pointer. Shortly he is joined by his mate. They have not long to hunt for a meal: for, suddenly dropping down, he has a mouse in his claws and his mate has another. Back they go to their young ones that are not quite able to fly, and are looking out for their parents like so many cats, to which indeed they bear a striking resemblance. Their appetites are good, but they have not long to wait, for mother and father owl are off and hunting again, almost immediately; and nearly through the whole night long they thus continue to fulfil their paternal duties.

Only those acquainted with country life would credit the number of different kinds of mice to be met with in the grass fields. The short-tailed, stout-bodied meadow-mouse, called by the country-people the dog-mouse, in size resembling a young rat, the wood-mouse, and the shrew-mouse are all found there. These, together with the barn or house-mouse, are the chief source of food for owls

and their young all the year round. I cannot say that they form their exclusive diet, for, as you can see from the owls' castings, they occasionally eat birds.

If you come upon a barn owl in the daytime, perched on a rafter in some out-building, or sitting on the grate of your bedroom, as you are dressing some morning, which haven he has reached by flying down the wide old-fashioned farmhouse chimney—this is not of so unfrequent occurrence as you might think—he will look at you in a wonderfully wise manner, and if you steadily return his gaze, it is very comical to see what strange antics he will play, bobbing up and down and twisting his head from side to side. Should you try to make a nearer acquaintance with him, he will look at you for a moment and then deliberately turn over on his back, with his claws drawn upon his breast, looking the very picture of helpless innocence. Do not pick him up unless your hand is protected by a stout leather glove; for, in spite of his appearance, he is a brave bird and a determined fighter, and like a cat, is no foe to be despised when he is on his back.

If you catch him, and tame him by kindness and

patience, you will find him a most amusing pet when you have obtained his confidence, as I have done, and as you can do, if you really have an interest in the matter. Birds are not slow to judge whether you have or no.

The bird that by daylight looked a humped-up bunch of feathers, stands before you in the evening a bright, active creature, with his breast shining like satin, and his beautiful dark eyes watching all your movements. He will then come at your call, and perch on your hand or chair, and is quite fond of having his head stroked like a cat.

I am glad to know that farmers regard barn owls with favour, and will not have one of their best friends molested if they can help it.

. . . . . .

Summer is gone. The wind sobs and sighs through the bare branches of the trees which have lost their leaves. Evening comes quickly upon us. It will be a wild, gusty night, for the setting sun is surrounded by heavy masses of storm-cloud. This is the best hunting-time for the brown owls, and they choose as their hunting-grounds grand, park-like, fern-covered stretches, which have dotted over

their surface, singly or in clumps, the remains of fine old oak and beech trees, made grey and hollow, torn and twisted by the ravages of time. These wrecks of the monarchs of a forest of former ages, serve as homes and resting-places for that feathered Friar Tuck of the woods, the bold brown owl and his relative the long-eared owl. Both of these frequent the same haunts; where you see one you may expect to find the other.

There he sits, low down, close to the trunk of that old beech. He has just come out from his bedroom, and is not yet quite wide awake. Look at him well. He is a bird of sturdy make; his head, which is more rounded than those of the other kinds of owls, being large and well set on his shoulders.

His brown, grey colour, flecked here and there with white, harmonises well with the trunks and branches of the gaunt, weather-beaten trees; one of his eyes is wide open, the other completely closed. He glances up and down. The next moment he stretches one leg out as far as he can, and the wing over it to the fullest extent, and then he repeats these movements on the other side. So far good, but his toilet is not yet complete. Next, raising

both his wings well up over his back, he fans them backwards and forwards for a few seconds. Then he shakes himself with his feathers puffed out, making himself look double his natural size; and he puts on the finishing touches by running his wing-feathers through his bill.

He is now ready for action. His blue-black eyes are wide open, and he is off on the forage. Clearing the tree-tops, he flits here and there, to right and left, over the more open parts, now high up, now close to the ground. He has caught sight of some creature and hangs for a moment in his flight. Down he goes with outstretched wings, and the next moment rises with a young rabbit, whose mother's warning stamp came too late to save him. His squeak when the owl gripped him has warned the others, who dash off to their burrows at the top of their speed. The owl returns to his mate, who salutes him with a loud hoot. After they have finished that slight repast they will both hunt through the night, and keep on calling to each other.

In suitable localities their hooting can be heard far and near, as the brown owl is a common bird. They store up for future use all that they catch, ex-

cepting what is necessary to supply their immediate wants. In some weathers I am positive they cannot hunt, for if any member of the owl family gets its plumage wet it is in a sorry plight. The poor bird is wretched, and will not eat till it has loosened out its matted feathers.

When they are dry, and shake themselves, a powdery dust flies out from them. They dust themselves like poultry, rolling first on one side and them on the other, kicking and striking with their feet in the very height of enjoyment. I give my pets about a quart of sifted road-sand on a thick sheet of brown paper. As a rule the early morning is the time for their dust-bath. They drink very sparingly, only taking one or two sips at a time.

A keeper's lad that I knew said, "I has orders from the head un to kill every varmint owl I comes across. He says they comes on the coops of a night when we've got the young pheasants."

"How can they get at the young birds when they are closed up in the coops for the night?"

"I never thought of that. I don't see as they can. No, it ain't in reason."

"Have you got any mice about?"

"Yes, and rats too. I can't put my grub down anywhere but what it gets nibbled. Drat them things! After they've been messing it about I can't stomach it, noways; and we has 'em most when the bird season's on."

"Just so, my young friend, of course you do. There is plenty of food scattered about for them to pick up. The owls visit your coops for the rats and mice, not for your birds."

"Well, I'm jiggered if you ain't about right. I say, mister, what do you reckon he does with them owls? We never has 'em nailed up on the shed now."

"Did you ever see a bird screen?"

"What's that?"

"Why, the head of a bird with the wings spread round it, fixed to a fancy handle."

"Oh! I see'd one up at the house. They said master had shot it in furrin parts, and had it done up for the missis like that."

"Well, listen to me."

"All right, my ears is open."

"Just now owls are the fashion for ladies' fire-screens, I am sorry to say, and your head un,

as you call him, knows where to take them to market."

"Have you got any idea what he'd get for 'em?"

"The very least would be a shilling each."

"Botheration! you don't say so. He ain't give me a brass farden. I say, mister."

"Well, what is it?"

"The next owl I shoots at I misses. You understand."

The long-eared owl, or horned owlet of the country people, is a lighter made bird than the brown owl. He is more hawk-like in his movements, and has more dash. With his feather-tufts erected, and his bright, orange eyes wide open, he is a very imposing-looking gentleman. His livery is a bright fawn-brown, dashed here and there with grey and white, so mixed and blended together that it is impossible to convey a correct impression of it unless he is before you.

A gusty night after a day's rain is the time that suits him. On such nights he comes from the woods down to the woodland farms. I have often watched him at work there.

A gentle breeze comes over the woodlands just

strong enough to move the clouds, still heavy and dark with moisture, across the face of the moon, which at one moment shines brightly, and the next is obscured. The mice come out of the stack by ways and means known only to themselves, to drink of the raindrops hanging on the thatch. The long-eared owl knows of this. It is not drink that he requires, but food, and this is how he gets it. Dashing with hawk-like flight from the woods into the rickyard, like a snipe, he twists and turns in all directions, upwards, downwards, and sideways. The quantity of mice he destroys must be very great; with a gulp one is gone. Perhaps the tip of its tail may be seen wriggling out of his mouth, nothing more.

It is my firm opinion that mice are at times a vital necessity to owls. Those that I have had have received every possible attention; they have not been caged, but have been allowed to have their liberty inside the house. This has been their bill of fare: perfectly fresh raw beef, not too much of it; half-cooked liver and lights, rats, mice, and birds, principally sparrows, young and old. To them, any of the finch family have been accept-

able food, but they have not seemed to care for starlings, thrushes, or blackbirds; and of these would only eat the head, apparently under protest.

If you ever have an owl as a pet, do not get tired of it, or slight it after you have gained its confidence. It will look for and expect the attention and caresses it has been accustomed to; it is quite an easy matter to break the heart of a bird. I would rather kill with my own hand any pet of mine than give it up to any one, unless he was a greater lover of wild creatures than myself: and such a one, I fancy, would be hard to find.

Scapegoats have always existed, and will continue to do so as long as the world spins round. The owl is blamed for much mischief, the real author of which is the murdering, thieving, crafty rat, whose evil deeds are laid to the door of a dozen creatures.

How much cruelty is perpetrated by the bad shot, who is not above letting drive at cheepers? I cannot understand how such sportsmen ever get an invitation to shoot. As retrievers are not infallible, his victims are not always brought to bag. They

conceal themselves and are forgotten: that which cannot be counted is not missed. In the cool of the evening these poor creatures, tortured with pain, crawl from their hiding-places to die in agony, or to be more mercifully despatched by some animal or bird of prey in search of a meal. Of all this no notice is taken; but if any portion of one of these is found in the owl's larder, how roundly is he abused! Fair-play is a jewel too often kept locked up.

The short-eared owl, or woodcock of the marshmen, in the general tone of his colouring, his form, and his flight, much resembles his near cousin the long-eared owl; and their eyes are much alike, but he is still more hawk-like in his movements, and his habitat is very different.

A November gale sweeps over the marshes from the north-east, causing the alder and willow branches to crack and snap. The green plovers are all huddled up in a bunch with their heads to the wind. The wiry bent grass growing on the sea-wall bends and switches like so many whips. The lap of the tide on the saltings, the shriek of the curlew, and the twitter of the dunlins tell you plainly birds will

keep close to cover if they can get it. A dunlin shoots over the wall, then another, at last a whole flock. What is driving them? See, there comes a short-eared owl. He catches sight, and throwing himself up in the air he makes for the marshes; he is not affected by the gale. A little to leeward a shore shooter is making his way towards the saltings. A snipe springs from a clump of rushes in front of him. He fires, and wounds the snipe; only the tip of its wing is injured, so it does not drop at once, but wavers in its flight, crying, "Scape! scape!" The owl raised by the shot sees this and takes in the situation at once. With a dash he catches it and is off, elated with his success, and none the worse for the anathemas hurled after him by the disappointed shore shooter.

Where the woodcock owl makes his home he can take enough and to spare to supply his wants. You can see him hunt by day; and, judging by his actions, he is a successful hunter. His light frame and swift flight enable him to catch birds that few would give him credit for.

The last owl that I will mention, the little owl, is very rare in our islands. Perhaps I may be allowed

to give some account of his "tricks and manners" in the following history of my bird "Patch."

"Will you come and look at a small owl I have caught?" I was asked one day.

"Certainly I will."

Sitting mournfully in a cage suspended from a rafter, I saw a little fellow not more than eight inches in length, with his wise-looking yellow eyes wide open. It was a naked-footed night-owl (*Strix passerina*). Knowing something of his own language, I gave the little bird his salute by sounding one of his call-notes. Bending his head down he replied directly.

Something about him interested me, and I paid him many more visits. Till one day his owner said, "You know how to treat that bird far better than I do; will you accept him, cage and all?"

"On one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you accept his portrait, life-size, in return."

"A bargain!" was the answer; "and, from what I have seen, you will get tired of him in a week."

I took him home with me at once, a mournful-looking little object. In the evening, as I sat by

the side of his cage, he tried his best to make me talk to him, which I did. Then I opened his cage-door, and putting my hand in, very gently stroked his head with my finger. His low, complaining cry stopped instantly. After a little while I took him out from the cage and placed him on my hand. Settling down on it, more in the position of a partridge than a bird of prey, he closed his eyes and slept. There was comfort for him at last. I unbuttoned my waistcoat, and, placing him inside, let him sleep there for two hours without disturbing him. That good long sleep and the warmth, with proper food, brought him round, for I could plainly see that he would soon have joined his tribe in a shadow flight elsewhere if he had not come to me when he did. He was then quite a wild bird, for his wing and tail feathers were perfect — a sure sign.

By degrees he lost some of his shyness, and with returning strength began to give me some little insight into his character, and to talk in his own way to my wife as well as myself. A gentle, intelligent, fearless bird he is; no bite or scratch have we had from him. As much care and attention have

been given him as to a little child, and he has repaid it by his quaint and most amusing ways.

Regularly, when evening comes, he is let out to play in the cellar whilst his cage is cleaned, and real play it is, a proper game at hide-and-seek. Up to a certain point he sits close to me and watches the proceedings, until, whilst I am placing the clean straw in his cage, he will suddenly vanish. I look for him, but where he has gone it is for me to find out. No easy business, for his colour—well, it is no colour at all; his feathers are a dingy-grey-brown, flecked with white here and there. Presently I spy a pair of eyes shining out from a corner, and, turning the lamp in that direction, I see, drawn up beside the leg of a stool, with one wing thrown sideways and his head looking over it, my bird Patch. Finding himself discovered, with a loud, shrill bark, as loud as a terrier's, he is off again. I move a broom, and see something peering up at me, squatting and looking exactly like a toad: my bird again. He darts away, and I am not able this time to find him for a long while; but after moving one thing and another I come to a box resting on four bricks. I move this, and

then, stepping back, cautiously watch. Is it a rat? No, it is Patch stretched out and flattened just like one. I want him now, but he does not choose to come, and starts on the war-path. Running like a partridge, and as quickly, out from his hiding-place, he stands and defies his master. Yell upon yell comes as if from some infuriated cat. In snaps, barks, and pig-like squeaks, all mixed up, he vents his little grievance. I sue for peace, and any one not knowing what it was would think it a mortal combat going on.

After being placed in his cage he is taken up-stairs to his mistress to be soothed down. To hear his chatter then you would think it came from some injured magpie rather than from a little owl. The end of it is that he is let out, and at once he perches on her hand. He is as happy as a king and as proud as a peacock when there: and then is the time to see Patch in his glory. He draws himself up to his full height, raises the feathers on his head to a crest, and looks at me like a demented owl; yelping presently, he looks at me next with the eyes of a dog; at other times an expression almost human comes into them. I should like to know

what his opinion about myself is, and the only index I have to it is in his eyes, which at times seem to speak volumes. I do think in some way or other my various moods influence him, he looks at me so strangely. It is not fear, for he is a spoilt pet—but sometimes I fancy he takes me to be a giant owl who knows everything, for I talk to him in his own tongue. There is a totally different expression in his eyes when he looks at my wife, that of confidence.

Why Patch should be called a night-owl I do not know, for he feeds by day and runs about then too; and barks, crows, and chatters by day as well as by night. The ringing bark is stated to be peculiar to the coquimbo, or prairie owl. That is not so, it is also Patch's bark, which is the same as that of the great eagle-owl, and equally loud. One is the giant, the other the dwarf of their tribe. Another peculiarity I note is, whilst as a rule my bird and others are often represented in illustrations in a stooping posture before fixing their prey, in reality this bird draws his body up to the full height, throws the head back, and then strikes with bill and foot. A wonderful hand-like foot it is. He

can cling to a brick wall or any rough surface like a bat and pick up a mouse or a bird; dead ones here, of course, which are brought to me for him; I do not give him live creatures; and taking the mouse from my fingers he will hold it out at the full stretch of his very long leg for my inspection, and then throw, not drop the mouse to the other side of his cage.

During the day Patch stays in my painting-room. After tea I fetch him down to our sitting-room, where I am busy, beside my wife, with my books or writing. He is no sooner placed on his stand opposite the table than he asks to be let out. The cage-door being opened, he is off on a tour of inspection — and a game. Nothing escapes his notice. Running with the speed of a partridge or quail over the carpet, he inspects all things, particularly myself. No matter how he is engaged, he will come from time to time in the most quiet manner to have a look at me. His wings have never been clipped, so that he can move very rapidly, At times he compels me to catch him and put him in the cage. Getting hold of him very gently, I turn him over back downwards in the palm of my

hand. Patch at once draws his feet up to his breast, rolls his eyes at me, and gives full vent to his grief in awful sounds. Some one being choked, and trying to protest against the process, one might fancy it to be. I place him in the cage in the same position; when he gets up on his perch he looks at me in a very demoniacal manner. We are friends again directly, however. Like his master, he has a will of his own, and it generally ends in his having his when he pleases, and I mine when I can get it.

Tea being over, Patch watches the proceedings—as all things, myself included, get settled down—from under a chair or table. Then, with a run over the room, a jump on to a chair, and from that to the table, thence to the top of his cage, Patch remains on his throne for the rest of the evening—his game in the cellar excepted.

During the evening he will condescend to address a few sentences to me, just to let me know he can see me, nothing more. His mistress has his undivided attention. From the top of his cage he holds forth with great and untiring eloquence, crest raised, body upright, looking like one of those

pepper-box owls. He walks about from one side to the other—his joy is great and loud; and with a low, chattering cry, he calls to his mistress. She holds out her hand, and Patch steps daintily on to it; trims his feathers, turns his head upside down to have a look at me, and then goes to sleep.

As a man I have given years of study to the birds of prey, so named, who were my first loves as a little lad. Falcons, hawks, and owls stand alone for intelligence and affectionateness, unmixed with a particle of fear; but if there be any difference it is certainly in favour of the owls.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FARMER'S FEATHERED FRIENDS.

FIRST on the list stands that much-abused friend, the rook. Forty years ago he had a rough time of it in some counties: from morning to night there was little peace for rooks on any farmer's ground. In the flat counties they are called crows. Very few of the rising generation have ever seen a pair of the old-fashioned "crow-clappers," or heard their deafening din. I was very familiar with them in my youth, and have often played on them.

A "crow-clapper" was a long-handled machine like a small shovel, the broad part of it about the size of a schoolboy's slate. To this was looped loosely a second piece of the same size. When this instrument was flourished vigorously the

music (?) could be heard at a great distance; the greater the distance the better for the ears of the listener. Nor was this all: there was a vocal part besides, which it was expected the "crow-keeper" or rather rook-scarer, should sing most lustily.

These simple country functions are almost things of the past; many of them have gone, never to return. Those of them that belonged to our boyhood are apt to recur to the memory as life advances, when much that occurred in our early manhood is forgotten.

That doggerel verse sung by the crow-keeper I remember well, having shouted it myself hundreds of times:—

> "Fly crow, eat your spoil [spile],
> While I sit down and rest awhile;
> For you know if master happens to come,
> You must fly and I must run!
> Away crow! away crow!"

Now as this, when properly done, was sung to a quick-march tune, the clappers marking the time most energetically, we leave the reader to imagine for himself the uproar. What rook with any self-respect could eat his meal within sound of such a

combination? He was fain to quit those large fields, forty acres though they measured, and betake himself to the less guarded upland pastures, although even there he had an uncertain footing.

No weak-chested lad had the least chance of getting that musical post of crow-frightener.

"Dang them warmints!" old Farmer Wills was wont to exclaim, "they pulls the turf up. If some on 'em ain't settled, there wun't be no feed fur the sheep. Go an' git the old double, an' kill some on 'em off."

The worthy man had not the faintest notion that the birds were feeding on the larvæ of the cockchafer that was devouring the roots of the herbage. "Give a dog a bad name," &c. Thanks, however, to the writings of recent field naturalists, these creatures that have been so long unjustly treated, now enjoy—many of them, at least—comparative security.

The rook is a specially industrious bird; he is up early, and he does not roost until dusk; and when we consider that from his first flight in the morning until he roosts at night, he is continually clearing the fields and pastures from insects that would

injure the farmer's produce, we must recognise him as one of the greatest unpaid benefactors of man. He steals some fruit, it is true. Nearly all wild creatures take a small tithe from man; it is only their due, for by their unwearied exertions they destroy those enemies, whose name is legion, that he could not combat without their aid. Only those who have lived with the birds all their lives, roaming about in the woods, over the fields and the waste lands, can form any opinion how much man is indebted to his feathered friends for his welfare and comfort.

Next to the rook comes the jackdaw, the shepherd's assistant. Whenever a farmer shoots one of these bright little fellows, he kills a sanitary inspector of, we might say, two or three sheep. The woolly creatures are his particular charge. Where you see rooks you will most likely see or hear jackdaws not far from them; not invariably, but generally. With the jackdaws you will find the beautifully marked starlings. "That is never a starling," exclaimed a friend of ours, on being shown the faithful portrait of one of these birds; "I thought starlings were all black." And so think many who

have not noticed them closely. If they were not such common birds they would be highly prized on account of their beauty and their aptness in acquiring various accomplishments. No British bird, not even the kingfisher, surpasses in its plumage the metallic beauty of a cock starling at his best. He is a glorious fellow, as he puffs out the feathers of his throat, drops his fluttering wings, and sings a love-song to his mate. His yellow bill is almost as bright as a blackbird's. A mimic of the first order, too, he is.

For several consecutive years a pair of starlings built in a corner of a room, in one of my homes. It was wonderful to hear the fine fellow sing to his mate in that corner, unheeding me, as I often sat quite near, busy at my easel. Apart from his own melodious whistling, he would run over parts of the songs of other birds for her delight, giving now some of the flute-like notes of the blackbird, as he sings in the spring evenings after a shower, just before the sun sinks low; and then again two or three notes of the storm-cock or missel-thrush would ring out, just as they come from his throat as he sits on the top twig of some wind-tossed tree, shouting in

glee when the gale is at its highest, and other creatures are hushed in fear.

After that would follow the "spink-pink-pink!" of the chaffinch, and next the winter-song of the robin, his farewell to the dying year. All sung truly without one false note. And then the odd bird would finish up by mewing like a cat. This was, of course, a wild bird; the starling in a state of nature is a thorough mocking-bird, as all know who have made a study of him in the country. The young ones are dull brown at first, of a peculiar shade. In spite of their vast numbers, and the very easy opportunities of observing them, some ornithologists have described them as solitary thrushes.

A large flock of starlings comes as a blessing to farm-lands where the stock are pastured. They delight to be on the backs of the animals, on their heads, round their feet, pecking and dibbling round about their muzzles as they feed. Here, there, and everywhere are the starlings; as the insects come in sight they have them, running on the ground or flying! I have often watched these birds hawking for insects in mid-air. The amount they destroy in a single day when they have young ones to provide

for must be enormous: as one watches them come to their nests their mouths and bills appear to be crammed full. A nest of young starlings will keep both parents very busy from morning till night. When the cherries are ripe the starling will certainly have them if he has the chance, as indeed will blackbirds, thrushes, sparrows, chaffinches, and others. Insect and grain eaters, all like cherries more or less. If you look at the bunch of birds a cherry-minder has in his hand when he leaves the orchard at night, you will be surprised to see what different species visit the trees. Those that are not able to swallow a cherry whole peck at it; the starling is not alone in this matter.

Looking at the matter all round, and weighing the harm these fruit-stealers do against the services they render in our fields and orchards, I say confidently the good outweighs the evil ten times.

Thank God! the woods and the fields are open to the poorest working naturalist to study in; so is the highroad. Printed books are good, and helpful too; but the three greatest books given by God to man are free and accessible to the poorest student—the book of nature, the book of

humanity, and one other book. And in them a man may read freely, as he has leisure, and be earning his daily bread at the same time.

To return to our feathered friends. You will see scattered about at various distances, wagtails — or dish-washers, as they are locally termed—the inseparable companions of the cattle and starlings. The common black and white, or pied wagtail, it is, as a rule, that you see in the pasture-lands. Occasionally you may come across the beautiful yellow-breasted species, but not often; you will see fifty of the former for one of the latter. These pretty, nimble little creatures, so "peart," as our country folks would say, and lively in their motions, are fly-catchers. They trip and run in all directions round about the great helpless cattle, catching their small tormentors on their legs, bellies, and even from about their heads and ears. The stock would suffer tortures if the birds did not clear their ears out. Many of us know how a poor pony's ears will be sometimes literally black with winged blood-suckers.

The wagtails brush and flick about with their wings as the creatures graze, and snap the flies that come out in all directions. Sometimes half-

a-dozen busy wagtails will gather round about one cow or horse. Birds and animals understand each other, without a shadow of doubt. The friendly and practical little wagtail generally builds his nest in the farmer's fagot-stack.

The wild pigeons come next on our list. These include the common ring-necked wood-pigeon, stock-pigeon or stock-dove, rock-dove or pigeon, also the turtle-dove. All four visit the cultivated lands more or less. I have heard men grumble about the harm done by these; but if you ask what definite mischief there was to complain about, you will fail to elicit anything worth listening to. I have kept close records, for many years, of their comings and goings in the heavily timbered and well-cultivated southern counties, more particularly Surrey and Sussex, and have noted little harm done by them worth speaking of.

"They cums tu the fields, they gits in the corn, they gits all over the place, an' they spiles the turmits." This the farmer tells you as he stands inside the copse waiting for a shot at the pigeons. He knows where they come; but he is very far astray as to their behaviour.

Two of the wild plants that are the farmer's worst foes, as weeds, are charlock—by him called chadlock—and the wild-mustard plant. The pigeons search out and feed on these and on other ill weeds; but "they cums to my fields," and that is enough. So do the butterflies and other beautiful creatures, but not to feed on the produce of his labour. The bill of a pigeon is weak compared to that of other woodland birds; not at all fitted for digging or pecking to any great extent. Their swallowing power is very great, but most of their food is picked up from the ground. Of course the true reason so many are shot is because they are good birds to eat.

The turtle-dove is a bird of passage; he is common enough in some parts of Surrey. I have seen from ten to thirty of them rise from the standing oats, or from the long grass in the hay-field, at one flight. One of my friends shot a couple as they were rising from the oats, and opened their crops. Not a single grain of oat did he find in them. They were full of a little vetch that grew abundantly at the roots of the oats, or, to express it in true rustic agricultural phrase, "at

the stam o' the whuts." I was with the man at the time; after that examination of the birds' crops he declared he would never shoot another pigeon.

Facts are subborn things to deal with. Any one fond of wild creatures can soon form a most accurate and impartial estimate as to the amount of good and harm they may do, although the knowledge may not be gained in a year. Of course one would not say no harm at all is done. The amount varies according to circumstances over which the poor bird has no control—weather, or shortness of food, such as acorns and beech-mast. The trees do not always bear equally well, and then the creatures are driven to fill their crops with any green food that is not absolutely injurious. But wild pigeons, as a rule, get their living in the woods and on the outskirts of the fields. They form one of the most pleasing and familiar sights in our rural districts; and to many of us, as to one of our best women poets, the "cushat's cry" is dear.

The white rumped rock-dove, or rock-pigeon, is not a common bird in the southern counties. In the rocks by the sea they have their favourite homes.

In the north, where the land in some places only grows oats in scanty patches, pigeons may do harm, for the very reason that they can get oats or nothing; but in the south of England it is different.

The sparrow, or "spadger," is a friend to the farmer, although he has from time immemorial done his best to exterminate that small bird. Happily for his lands, he has not succeeded in doing this. Although the commonest of our common birds, his ways of getting a living are still not very clearly understood.

He is caught in thousands for sparrow-shooters, and by the trap. Then the farmers' sparrow clubs claim their host of victims. Besides which, sparrow-pie, sparrow-pudding, and roast sparrows, spitted closely on long sticks or skewers, are farmhouse delicacies long remembered by those who have enjoyed them. It is not very often that the good dame can be persuaded to give her men-folk a treat of this kind; for she very justly observes, "Drat the little things! it do take such a lot o' time to get 'em ready." But if once she makes up her mind for the job, all hands have to set to work to help her, both men and maids; and when the pie,

with its light golden crust well bulged up with sparrows, tender and juicy, is placed on the table, eyes are wont to glisten and mouths to water and twitch in a state of delightful expectancy.

The town and country sparrow are the same species, but there is as much difference between the plumage of the two as there is in the outward appearance of the chimney-sweep and the well-to-do mechanic. Philip Sparrow's surroundings in town smirch and blacken his plumage. As to his habits, to begin with, he picks up almost any small trifle he comes across — nothing seems to come amiss with him. The hardy little fellow knows well how to take care of himself and to make himself comfortable. During severe winters in past years I have seen many birds that have been starved to death or perished with cold, but never a single house-sparrow. He attaches himself most pertinaciously to man, and, badly though he is treated, he will not leave him and his surroundings. "Them there sparrers rewins things; them guseberries wun't hev' a pint o' fruit on 'em—the cussed things hev' pulled off every fruit-bud as showed: mother wun't hev' no jam this year, cuss

them!" Such were the sentiments expressed by one of our farmer acquaintances in my hearing. Strange to say, when the fruit season came round, that particular year he had a much heavier crop and larger fruit on his gooseberry-bushes than he had gathered for years. When I twitted him with the fact, he simply replied that "he couldn't mek it out, nohow."

Philip Sparrow bears no malice and sticks to the farmer. He even builds in his thatch or under the tiles of his house. If you have ever lived in one of those old farm homesteads, very early in the morning, if it is summer-time, almost before the dawn, you will have heard him begin his monotonous and exasperating conversation—"Chip-chip-chip! chisic-chisic-chisic! chip-chip-chip!" By degrees the whole colony joins in. In the stillness of early dawn, when the farm is dead still, the noise to one unused to it is most irritating.

When they have their young, the sparrows are most persevering insect-hunters. All the day through, from morning till night, the cock bird continues bringing his mouth full of insects to feed his mate as she sits on her nest, or their young

ones. For them he hunts the fields, the hedges, and the gardens. At the time they most need it, insect-life in all stages, mature and immature, forms food for himself and his family. The aphides, those garden pests, he diligently hunts for, and he carries off a mouthful at a time. In the hay-fields he forages before the grass is mown; and when the long swathes lie there on the ground is the time to see the sparrows at their best. They go to the fields in flocks to capture the insects that swarm in and about the newly cut grass. There is a small chubby brown beetle, locally known as the hay-chaffer, that they seem remarkably fond of. They will not leave the hay-fields so long as there is a chance of getting one.

When the corn is ready for cutting, the farm lads are shooting all day long round about the outskirts of the fields, to kill the sparrow and keep him off the wheat, as they say. Now, one harvest time I owned a falcon and two owls. To keep these birds is a matter of care and no small expense, if you wish to see them as they ought to be, in full health and perfect plumage. My pets were not caged ones. To one of those sparrow-killing, or sparrow-scaring

lads I applied, and I struck a bargain with him. He undertook to supply me with shot birds at so much a dozen, and to deliver them to me every evening at the feeding time. He brought me bunches of birds regularly enough, but there was never a sparrow in the whole lot. Nearly all were insect-feeding birds—a wheat-field swarms with insects at all times—but not one of them was in any way injurious to the wheat. There is air, sunshine, and great warmth in a large corn-field—things which all insects need to bring them to perfection. The flocks of birds that rise from it are not there after the corn; it is the insect-life that attracts them. Fly-catchers and willow-warblers do not eat corn; and yet, with the exception of one or two young chaffinches, it was of those two species the bunches of birds were composed.

Is it not possible for the beings that have been created with man as his companions to have fair-play in God's world?

The sparrows, with other birds, throng the fields in hosts just before and after the corn is cut. They pick up the unnumbered grains that drop from the ears in the field. That is their opportunity and they

make use of it. If the Jews of old were forbidden to muzzle the great ox that treads the corn, shall boys be allowed to wantonly or unreasonably destroy the little creatures whose fall we are told the All-father notes?

Even after a month or six weeks have been passed by them in picking up the scattered grains, sharp as are those thousands of eyes, they do not pick up all, as you may prove by looking at any wheat-field that has lain fallow for any length of time after it has been reaped; the blades will be springing up in all directions.

And so we think we have made out a fair case for persecuted Philip Sparrow.

The green plover, or lapwing, is another of the farmer's good friends. He not only forms a beautiful and interesting feature in the landscape, running over the fields and meadows, but, by his incessant search for those creatures that infest some lands, he confers on their cultivators more benefits than they appreciate. Being a very wide-awake bird, happily for himself, he does not get interfered with as a rule. To get the blind side of a flock of peewits wants, as they say, "a lot of o'nooverin'" (man-

œuvring); nine times out of ten the experiment ends in failure. So much the better for those on whose lands they come at various seasons. Plovers are largely affected in their movements by the weather.

The kestrel, the mouse-killing falcon, not only gets shot, but insult is added to injury, for he is nailed up to the end of the barn. The falcon glides and hovers all the day, and until late in the evening, catching mice and other small deer. The numbers of large short-tailed field-mice, or voles, in some chalky upland pastures, are simply startling. They are vegetable feeders, and when full-grown are as large as a half-grown rat; if you examine the mouth of one you will see it is like that of the hare. These, with the fawn-coloured long-tailed field or wood mouse, work sad havoc in farm gardens. The kestrel kills them day by day, as he hovers and fans over field after field. For this service he is made heartily welcome to a charge of shot. I have a dim recollection of a sage warning that formed a copy-slip in my school days, "Put not temptation in the way of youth." It applies to all ages, I fancy. If the farmer's wife had not placed her brood of chicks with their mother under the coop in the short

mown grass in the paddock away from the house, the kestrel would not have spied them out, running to and fro, as he fanned over his mouse-hunting. The sight rouses his hunting instincts at once, and they are too strong to be held in check, choice Dorking chicks though these be. And if he is seen in the act it is enough to doom him and all his race for years to come; one chick that might never have attained maturity weighs down the balance of slain field-mice in hundreds.

There is one thing to be said, if one of the raptores gets killed another takes up his beat very quickly; so that in spite of himself the farmer has his winged mouse-hunter over his fields as usual. We have yet much to learn about bird-life.

To the owls—the farmer's feathered cats we might call them—after all, we give the palm for usefulness and intelligence, although we have purposely put them last on our list. Without them all his efforts might be useless, for they prey on those creatures that work him harm in the night-time. Besides what they kill and eat on the spot, or take to their young, they set by a store for some future time. By watching any pair that have settled on some farm,

you will find that from sunset to sunrise they go to and fro continually; and they never come to the nest without a quarry of some kind. The tide of public opinion is turning in favour of the owl at last; let us hope it will bring protection to other creatures also.

CHAPTER V.

THE FINCH FAMILY.

"WHAT are you in such a hurry to get your gun for?" I ask one of my friends, who fills the position of man-of-all-work in the place where I am staying for a time. His post, however, is rather a nominal one, for most of his time is spent in gardening.

I often have a chat with him, for I enjoy his quaint, original remarks, and although, as a rule, he is not expansive, when he does choose to talk he is always worth listening to. Besides this, he keeps his garden in excellent trim, and if there is one crop in it on which the old boy prides himself more than another, it is his peas. "No one ken come up to 'em round about here," he has told me more than once, with pardonable pride.

"What do I want with the gun? Hawfinches; they hawfinches in my peas!" he grunts.

As he leaves the tool-house I quietly follow, and place myself with him behind a low fagot-stack which stands in a line with the peas.

"Jest hear 'em! ain't it cruel?" he whispers. "I hope the whole roost of 'em may git in a lump so that I ken blow 'em to rags an' tatters. If you didn't know what it was you'd think some old cow was grindin' up them peas. Ain't they scrunchin' of 'em? All right now, I ken see you grindin' varmints! Now for it!" Bang!

Three birds fall—young ones in their first plumage, which has a strong likeness to that of a greenfinch.

After picking the birds up, we examine the pea-rows. There is no doubt as to the mischief the birds have done. The old fellow's own expression, "grinding up," is the best to convey any idea of the destruction that has taken place. Where the birds have been, nothing remains but the stringy portion of the pods of his precious "Marrer fats."

There is enormous power in the bill of the hawfinch, when the size of the bird is considered. The pea-pod is simply run through the bill, and the con-

tents are squeezed out in the state of green pulp and swallowed.

"Varmints I call 'em, an' nothin' else," is the remark my old friend makes, as he goes towards the tool-house and takes from a shelf a hen hawfinch and two young ones, the former probably the mother of some of the birds that are about, if not, indeed, of the whole brood, her plumage showing that she has been sitting.

"People wants me to git 'em full-feathered old birds for stuffin', but bless ye, ye might as well try to ketch weasels asleep. A cock hawfinch is about one o' the most artful customers as I knows on. The only time to get a clip at 'em is in winter, under the plum and damson trees. They gits there after the stones, any amount o' stones lays jest under the ground, an' they picks 'em out an' cracks them easy. I gits plenty o' young ones when peas are about—the old ones lets 'em come, but they take precious good care they don't come off the tops o' the tree themselves afore they knows there ain't anybody about. Some says they're scarce birds. I knows they ain't—leastways not when my peas are ready to gather."

In those districts of Surrey where peas are grown, hawfinches are a perfect plague, more especially if wood or copse lands are near.

The hawfinch, once seen, will be remembered. He is a stoutly built bird with a very large and powerful bill. A child friend remarked he had a very large nose. His appearance reminds one at times of a small parrot, and again, he looks exceedingly pedantic. The delicate tints of his plumage (light reddish-brown, dark brown, grey, black and white) are well blended. The wings when open are beautiful, some of the feathers being in the form of an ancient battle-axe, reflecting tints of blue and green.

Before field naturalists became so common, the hawfinch, or "haw grosbeak," was considered a rare bird in many localities. It is certainly a very shy and retiring one, watchful and quick in all its movements. For this reason it is seldom seen by those who search for it for ornithological purposes. It breeds freely round the neighbourhood of Dorking—a fact which is continually being proved by the great number of young birds that are found there in various states of nestling plumage; some

with the wing and tail feathers fully grown, others only just able to fly from the tree and back again. Much patient watching and a quick shot are needed to secure a pair of old hawfinches in full breeding plumage, but they fetch a price quite sufficient to encourage the attempt.

Although numbers of young birds are shot and buried in almost every garden where peas are grown, not half-a-dozen pairs of the old birds come into the hands of the bird-preservers in the course of the year. Their keen light-grey eyes glance in all directions, no matter where they may be. I have often watched them in the winter months before the mania arose for destroying the fine old trees that lined the sides of some of our highways. There, amongst the crab-trees, bullaces, pickets, wild plums, and sloes, I have perhaps chanced upon a pair of hawfinches in the course of a five-mile walk; but then you can only see one side of the hedge as you go along.

My pleasure in watching them at work on the stones of the plums, or the pips of crab-apples was brief: in spite of the care I took not to startle them, they would suddenly fling themselves on to

the road, perhaps to pick up gravel, and then as quickly jerk themselves back to the hedge.

The hawfinch is the quickest and most suspicious member of the finch tribes to be found in Great Britain. In winter his large bill is a light pinkish-brown, while in summer it changes to slate-blue. His nest, compared with that of other birds related to him, is simple in construction; but as it is of the bird I am writing, and not of his domestic arrangements, I will not venture upon a description of it.

The greenfinch, called sometimes green grosbeak, and more often green linnet, is one of our common birds. His plumage shows shades of green, yellow, and grey, with a touch of black. Of a less retiring and suspicious nature than the hawfinch, he builds his nest in gardens or shrubberies. Such confidence is, however, often misplaced, for if found by the gardener it is sure to be destroyed. Like the sailor, who is said to whistle for a breeze, the greenfinch calls for one, flying to the top of a tree at midday in the hottest summer, when other birds are dumb, and calling out at intervals in long-drawn notes, "Breeze—breeze—breeze."

"Oh yes, you shall have a breeze," says the gardener; "I'll make one on purpose for you," and he shoots him dead. Of the justice of this act the gardener must be allowed to be the best judge. He is probably bound in self-defence to protect his produce from the mischief wrought by birds of this sort. From my own experience, I may say that many of the most innocent-looking creatures are really the most destructive of the gardener's labour. When it is found that injury is done, and that in considerable quantity, the sentimental side of the question, to which our pity inclines, must give place to the practical.

The greenfinch is associated with my earliest childhood. On the wild sea-coast where we lived then, he was a great favourite as a cage-bird. Pets of that kind were much sought after at a time when books and amusements for the young were scarce, and any boy whose parents allowed him to keep a green linnet was considered lucky indeed. The birds were carried about by the boys in their pockets when out of school. They were docile and affectionate creatures, and I remember well that amongst them was a tame sparrow, which

for intelligence and liveliness was not outdone by any of the others. Perhaps it is these early recollections that make me feel kindly disposed to the greenfinch whenever I see him or hear his well-known call for a breeze. If he is only wise enough to remain away from the garden, there are but few who will molest him. Fashion changes, and nowadays not many would keep the greenfinch as a cage-bird. Setting on one side the fact that he, like others of his tribe, occasionally falls a victim to the sparrow-hawk or the kestrel, he has, I think, less to complain of than any of the finches.

A description of the bullfinch is hardly needed, so well is this beautiful bird with its brilliant scarlet breast known to dwellers both in country and town. The black, red, grey, and white tints of his plumage, peculiarly pure and bright in his wild state, make him conspicuous as he flits about from one side of the hedge to the other, his soft and slightly mournful pipe betraying his presence in the distance. Beautiful as the strains from some wood fairy's flute might be is the soft sweet little song, all his own, with which the bullfinch cheers his mate as she sits on her nest. At such times he shows

to the greatest advantage, with the jet-black feathers of his head raised, his breast puffed out, and his white tail-coverts showing to perfection.

In a captive state the bullfinch is affectionate and intelligent, well repaying care and attention. The timidity natural to him in his wild state vanishes when once he has gained one's confidence. He will follow any one about the house, up or down, and will go into his cage of his own accord, when he has had his range about.

One fine fellow I presented to my wife would sit on her shoulder and sing all breakfast-time. When I held out my hand to take a cup of coffee, he would fly off her shoulder, scuttle over the table, and, getting in front of me, would scold his very loudest, as much as to say, "How dare you bring your hand near my mistress!" This little performance over, he would fly back to her shoulder and sing his song, as if to assure her such behaviour would not be repeated. In keeping the bullfinch as a pet it is well to keep no other creature in the same room, for his sensitive, affectionate nature can bear no rival. He gives you his whole affection, and his distress if he sees you talking to another pet is painful to see. In

cases where his rival has been persistently noticed, he has been known to pine and die.

If the bullfinch would but confine himself to the woods, fields, and hedgerows, where, except for hawks and bird-catchers, he is safe, all would be well with him; but his favourite place of resort is the garden, and that just at a time when the fruit-trees are beginning to bud.

It is nonsense to assert, as some have done in works on birds, that the buds of which bullfinches and other birds make such havoc have insects in them. It is romancing; garden trees, fruit-trees especially, are tended with the greatest care. No insects are allowed to gather on any of the leaves, either outside or in. The care taken with them is carried to such an extent that I have known men employed in conservatories for weeks in sponging each individual orange and lemon leaf.

The outside trees, especially the plum and cherry, receive the same care, though in a different way. These are the trees to which the bullfinch pays his most unwelcome attentions. Not satisfied with the buds of the wild cherry and the plum to be found in the hedgerows, he deliberately seeks those of the

cultivated fruit, and in that way is a terrible hindrance to the gardener.

As a lover of birds from childhood, and now, at an advanced age, credited by some of my friends with having a severe attack of "birds on the brain," I would gladly exonerate my favourites from all blame. But the conclusion at which I have arrived, and which experience tells me is the true one, is, that some members of the finch tribe do a great amount of mischief in a garden. The bullfinch, in spite of his ruddy breast and his dainty flute-like song, is one of the gardener's special enemies. He gets shot down without mercy, and is left to rot beneath the trees which he has plundered of their buds.

The largest and rarest of the finch tribe is the pine bullfinch—a bird rare even in the pine-woods of Scotland, where it is supposed to breed, though about this I am not prepared to give an opinion. In plumage it rather resembles the crossbill. Being a Northern bird, it is probably migratory. All our common birds are more or less so, according to weather-changes. Vast numbers come to us from the Continent, and return again if they escape the

snares of the army of bird-catchers on the South Downs. The amount of small birds captured to supply the bird-markets is almost beyond belief. A bird-catcher with whom I had friendly relations for some time, and the accuracy of whose statements and observations I had no reason to doubt, gave me the number of dozens of birds caught and sold by him. He showed me his book where these numbers were duly entered, and side by side the receipts from them. I had much enjoyment in this man's society. Finding me to be a great lover of birds, but not a bird-catcher, he taught me all the secrets of his trade without reserve. These I keep religiously to myself. One day he told me of a strange bird he had picked up from the tangle on the beach. It was a turnstone—I recognised it at once from his accurate description, and my friend was as much surprised as pleased when I presented him with a portrait of the bird I had painted for him. That completely won his heart.

"Twink-twink, twing-twing, twink-twink! spink-spink-spink!" and then a joyous little song. There sits the singer, the handsomest chaffinch of them

all, or, as he is called in Germany, the "noble finch." It is unnecessary to describe the plumage of this bird, so common and so well known, the pet of the schoolboy and the favourite of the costermonger, who will have his "bloomin' chawfinch." Many are the singing-matches in which he takes part, and the time and order kept by the chaffinches when singing together might be imitated with advantage by many a musical assembly

The chaffinch is *the* bird of the Dials; and he really seems to enter into the spirit of the thing. No other bird used by the fowler calls so heartily in order to bring others within reach of net or limed twigs as the chaffinch.

He is a bird of high spirit, and, like a game-cock, answers a challenge directly. The green lanes and the elm-trees by the roadside are his resorts. I have seen him captured there many a time.

A man comes along the road with a small cage under his arm tied up in a handkerchief. In his hand he has a stuffed chaffinch in the attitude of challenging. Hearing the song of the chaffinch from the trees, he proceeds to fix his stuffed bird on a sloping portion of the trunk of one of the elms.

A couple of feet or so below this he places some bird-limed twigs or whalebone, on the ground close by his little cage. He then gives out a rattling challenge, answered at once by the bird in the tree, whose quick eyes search in all directions for his supposed rival. He soon discovers the singer, and his excitement at any other bird having the impudence to come and sing near his perch is extreme. Once more the challenge rings out; he can bear it no longer. Down he dashes, strikes the stuffed bird, causing it to sway up and down with the force of his stroke; and falling on the limed twigs below, finds himself at the foot of the tree, a helpless captive.

I have known country lanes, before the Bird Protection Act came into force, cleared of chaffinches, to the great disgust and anger of the country people. Though obliged for the protection of their crops to shoot them at times, they are far from willing to see them captured in this wholesale way.

Real country folk are very tender in their dealings with the birds that live near them. In the course of my experience, extending over many

years, I have never known a case of wanton cruelty occur in regard to wild birds. The labouring man, whose work so often lies far from the haunts of men, seeks companionship with the birds. Of these none is more friendly than the robin, who is sure to appear, however lonely the place.

Often in my own haunts, when watching for days together the movements and habits of some furred or feathered creature, the robin has come and made friends with me, becoming at last so intimate as to sit on the toe of my shoe and share my meal.

Birds are not the only creatures to be found thus fearless of man. An artist friend of mine, painting at his easel in a secluded spot in the Surrey hills, saw a large viper come and curl itself up close to his colour-box, too close by far to be agreeable. On looking round he saw another coiled up near to his easel. They would have done him no harm, but he thought it safer to put a greater distance between them and himself, and so left the spot.

Vipers are known to feed on young finches at times, for which reason no country lad will put his hand into any nest built in a tree before first looking into it.

But to return to our birds. The large thistles that used to grow on the waste lands were the favourite haunt of the goldfinch, who, as he hovered and flitted about, looked more like some tropical butterfly than a bird. The waste lands with their thistles are gone, and so are the goldfinches that fed on their downy seeds. A large portion of the common land is gone too. The moneyed class, who have bought up the copyholders by some arrangement best known to themselves, secure parts of the real common land to themselves by buying up and throwing it into land that never belonged to it. Of late years the commons have become little more than tracts of ground given over to game-preserving. Notice-boards warn people off the ground that is legally their own in the most arbitrary way. Nay, I have even known people summoned before a magistrate for no other crime than that of using what from time immemorial has been their right. In many cases they have pleaded their own cause and won it. I have heard them tell their grievances with tears in their poor old eyes.

"Yes," some of the old country folk will tell you, "goldfinches is scarce now. They used to be about

in hundreds one time o' day. You may go now for a month and not get a glint o' one." I have asked them the reason of this, and they have answered, with a shake of their grey heads, "They grups up the thistles" (with a forked thistle spud) "what the birds live on, and flies in the face o' natur', to turn it inter medder land—more fools they fur their trouble!" I know that such is the case: a small flock of goldfinches is a rare sight on a common in these days. Their true home is where stone-heaps and thistles are plentiful; where the flintgetter's old Flemish mare hangs her drowsy head, whilst the sun is high, in the shade of some clump of bushes; where the sandman's donkey rolls, and rasps the whole length and breadth of his tough hide on the sandy road of the common. In any tract famous for the growth of weed and tangle they lived and multiplied. Such spots are hard to find now, and the best place to look for goldfinches and siskins is near London, some five or six miles beyond the postal district, where the weeds thrive on land that has been cleared for building purposes. There, amongst stone-heaps and thistles, he still lives and breeds.

The bird-catchers, particularly those of the South

Downs, capture them in thousands at the time of the out- and in-coming migrations. The men are well acquainted with a variety of goldfinch known by the name of "cheval." These birds I have seen frequently. One which I had in a cage showed but little difference in colour and habits to those generally caught, though it was very much larger in size.

This large variety is well known in the Southern counties as the "cheval goldfinch." They are not as numerous at any time as their smaller brethren. They used to be much prized by the bird-catchers, who would ask half as much again for a cheval in good plumage as for any of the other birds. The price was not grudged, for they were fine specimens.

My own opinion is, that they are visitors from the Continent, where, under favourable circumstances, they have developed to their utmost limit. The fact that they are to a certain extent local strengthens this theory. The line of the Southern counties seems to be their limit, and the extent of their travelling, beyond which boundary I have never found them. It is to be hoped that in time the migrations of our most common birds will be more systematically worked out than they are at present.

Amongst those birds who cross the sea are thrushes, larks, finches, and the tiny goldcrest, so tender that it dies if you hold it in your hand too long. The fisherman of the North Sea and of different parts of our dangerous coasts tell of birds taking shelter on and about their vessels when the weather is rough. They are left unmolested, and continue their journey as soon as the storm is over.

The bramble-finch, very like the chaffinch in shape, though more sturdily built, is a bird of a more Northern clime. In severe winters it migrates southwards in vast flocks, and is often seen associated with the chaffinch in the beech-woods, where the mast is his chief food. The winter plumage of the bramble-finch, or brambling, is coloured with shades of orange, brown, black, yellow, and white, with here and there a touch of grey. His appearance in the country is very uncertain, his visits depending probably on the food to be got. Though the bramble-finches eat insects and seeds, their favourite food seems to be the beech-mast, and as there is not a full crop of these every year, their visits are consequently irregular. Unlike the schoolboy, who hunts for beech-nuts when they first fall,

the brambling waits until they have lain under the leaves for a month or two, when the outer covering has softened. I have known numbers of these birds visit the neighbourhood of Dorking and the Tillingbourne, and especially the woods of Wotton. Of late years they have become scarcer.

I kept a pair once, to observe their change of plumage in breeding-time. It was remarkable, the head and back of the cock bird turning jet-black. They were birds of a somewhat unpleasant disposition, so after a time I gave them their liberty.

The finches are bright and intelligent birds, very useful in their proper home—the woods and the fields; but those who value a full crop—or, in some cases, any crop at all—will be careful to exclude them from the garden.

CHAPTER VI.

OUR THRUSHES.

THREE species only of these are known to the general public; we have six in this country. Three of them are regular migrants, visiting and leaving us again as the seasons come round. All coast-dwellers who are anything of field naturalists are well aware of this fact. I have seen the sand-hills and the drier portion of the flats in the North Kent marshlands covered with birds about to migrate, waiting for a right wind to take them over the Channel.

"Ah, poor things!" an old boatman would say, "they be waitin' for a right breeze, an' then they'll get out o' harber quick." After the breeze had come, hardly a bird would be visible until the next army of travellers arrived. My own intimate ac-

quaintance with them has been made in the fertile and well-wooded counties of Southern England, where the whole family can be heard and studied to the best advantage.

On the hills, and about the moors in the season, you will find that shyest and most wary member of the whole family, the ring-ouzel, called by the rustics the "white-throated blackbird."

Great clouds sweep over the hills, casting, as they travel, moving shadows on the heather and bright green turf of the moor. It is green, for summer's fierce heat has passed; rain has fallen at times just enough to let us know that we may expect no more settled summer weather. We need not regret this, for autumn is clothing the hillside and the moor with the richest broken tones of crimson, olive, orange, grey, and buff. Rough gullies intersect the moor in many parts, flanked on either side by high banks; although these can hardly be called roads, yet they are used for that purpose. They are, in reality, huge masses of stone, covered with a thin crust of peat soil. Changes in the weather have affected some parts, causing them to crumble, and laying bare a cliff of greystone covered here

and there with the creeping vegetation of the moors.

Here the sparrow-hawk comes to perch, after one of his flights; but he takes wing again with a scream of mingled rage and fear, as his eye catches sight of the roaming naturalist, who lies crouched in the stunted juniper and luxuriant heather. The sparrow-hawks come here at stated times through the day, and here, too, they roost at night. The stunted form of juniper I allude to you will find in certain parts of the moor; on the open hilly portions you will find splendid specimens of the juniper-tree—whole thickets of them, such as would be considered priceless ornaments in a gentleman's grounds. They would not live there if they were transplanted; so much the better—they beautify the moorside, which is free to all. It is in such spots as these we have seen the ring-ouzel: he feeds to a certain extent on the juniper-berries; but the richer crop of berries of the mountain-ash, flashing out in crimson patches on the hills, have a far greater attraction for him. To this bill of fare is added vast quantities of other berries that are found all over the moor, together with insect-life in

profusion. The white-throated blackbird of the moors has a good table spread for him, that is why he stays here for a time before he returns to the lands which he left, to come up to higher ground. To the rustic dwellers of the moors and hillside he is a bird of great interest; I have never known one of them shoot or trap him: I believe it is "the white strap round his neck," as they term it, that saves him. It may not be that alone: his visits are irregular and mysterious; at least so they seem to the simple country folks, who, although they are usually familiar with the habits of the creatures that live near them, do not understand the varying influences that at times affect the migrating movements of birds. In spite of the light that has been thrown on the subject by the keepers of lighthouses round the coast of Great Britain—who have, at the request of some of our zealous ornithologists, saved one wing of each species that, being attracted by the light, had struck against the glass or been captured fluttering round the lighthouse—this varying in the migrating habits of the birds remains a vexed question with the most earnest students in natural history. In spite, too, of the statement in Holy Scrip-

ture, that "the stork in the heavens knoweth her appointed time." The most accepted theories are apt to break down, and so-called learned men have been found to be in error occasionally on simpler matters even than this. At the present time, 1890, it has been universally acknowledged by our greatest field naturalists—men who have visited all parts of Great Britain, even the remote Shetlands as well as the Continent, in their earnest researches—that the breeding-place of a few of the small waders that crowd some of our shores in the fall of the year remains to this day unknown, although the young ones are seen with the nest-down still among their feathers. Why the ring-ouzel comes and goes, sometimes singly, sometimes in flock, is also a mystery.

The name of "storm-cock" has been fitly given to the missel-thrush, which is the largest member of the thrush family. He is more a bird of the woods, except in breeding or nesting time, than any of the others. To a certain extent he is a more showy bird than his very near relative the song-thrush; his breast is more brightly coloured, and the spots on it are larger and darker. He is

a bold bird, and he looks it; we hear him loudly singing in the storm, and when all other birds, the robin excepted, are silent.

The rain falls in torrents, the wind blows as early March winds do blow at times, bunching up the clouds in mountain-like heaps which sail slowly along, being far too heavy to move quickly. Hail rattles down also, but there is a short lull after a time, and a small piece of blue shows in the sky, about the size of a child's pinafore. It is enough to start our storm-cock. The wind is still blowing a gale; nature's own organ pealing through the woods. That suits our bird well; he dashes out from his cover and up on to the highest twig of that old ash; grasping it with his strong feet, he swings to and fro in the rushing wind, and sings as he sways. It stirs one's blood to hear his wild clarion notes, now high, now low, and again almost shrieking in wild glee as he tosses and swings. The road may be very wet and slushy, and the wind may send a drenching shower of drops over you as it stirs the twigs and branches of the trees under which you walk, but who cares for that when watching that brave bird, and listening to his joy-

ous, defiant song! When the missel-thrush is nesting, no bird is more pugnacious in defence of his home and what it contains. Whether it be hawk, owl, crow, cat, stoat, weasel, or rat that comes near with sinister intent, he and his mate will go for it with a will.

If it be a feathered enemy, they will make the feathers fly in a surprising fashion; if it be a four-footed one, they will dash down and buffet the creature. I have seen cats bound off at top speed, glad enough to get to cover out of reach of a pair of injured missel-thrushes. But the courage of the bird frequently causes it to lose its own life. For if a stoat comes on to the velvety lawn of a country house, and the bird, usually shy and wary, happens to have built in one of the trees there, a duel has been fought, which has ended in the death of the brave bird.

Some of our readers may not be familiar with stoats and weasels in a state of nature. It is very certain that specimens in zoological collections, even the most artistically mounted ones that our museums contain, will not give you the least idea of their beauty and extraordinary

agility when free and at large. Stoats or weasels are not desirable visitors on a lawn; mice of various kinds, however, are more destructive to flower-beds than all the other pests put together; and the weasel family are the sworn foes and exterminators, if permitted, of mice and rats, so their visits may be fairly tolerated.

Some gentlemen that I know will not allow guns to be used near their dwellings; they are quite willing to allow nature's own police to keep order, and they are wise in this. To see a weasel with a short-tailed mouse or vole, almost as large as himself, carried retriever-fashion in his mouth, is a very interesting sight. I have seen it, and bid him good luck in his hunting many a time. There are at the present time far too few of his kind about. He will dart from a flower-bed on to the lawn, a perfect model of strength and activity; his bright eyes glisten as he looks round about in all directions before he begins to play. The most skilful acrobat is a clumsy pretender compared with that little fellow; he rolls, vaults, and tumbles in all directions, enjoying himself to his heart's content. From one of the trees on the lawn two missel-thrushes,

with angry, grating screams, rush down at him. He is ready for the assault, with his head up and his fore-feet well together; as he stands perfectly quiet, he might be photographed. In one instant the scene is changed, and you see a confused lot of wing and tail feathers, dashing now up, now down, and then sideways; some brown object mixed up with them, while the screams and shrieks from the birds are nearly deafening. The row will stop as quickly as it began; for one bird with a chattering note of fear flies off, leaving the cock bird in the stoat's mouth. The creature stands as still as possible for a few moments, and then he takes his prey into one of the flower-beds to eat him.

Lately, in one of my rambles, I came on a brood of missel-thrushes that had just left the nest. They were foraging for food in one of the upland meadows close to the woods, and I stood in the midst of them as they fed. It was a pretty sight; as one or the other got near me, they would look at me with their bright eyes, open their mouths, appear to chide me for my presence, and then go on searching for food. Both parents were close at hand,

now and again sending out a ringing note of warning, as one or other of their brood looked up. He seems to tell us when he sings that winter is past; and so he is always welcome to us.

That universal favourite, the blackbird, with his jet-black plumage and orange-coloured bill, is well known to every little toddler that lives in the country. "Blackie," as they call him, is the favourite, as a rule, in preference to the thrush, with the country people. Independently of his own rich song, he has a natural talent for mimicry, which dogs and cats find out to their cost. Rustic children think much of him; they will tell you that he knows them all; and indeed to credit the intelligence displayed by him you would need to live in some country house for a time, where one has been reared in a cage. All the sounds that he hears, especially if they are of a squeaking or whistling nature, he repeats to perfection; if he sees the dog in the garden or about the house, he will whistle for him exactly as his master does, and in so vigorous a tone that he would lead the dog to suppose that his services are required in the most urgent manner. Away rushes the dog round the

house, out into the meadow; and back he comes with his tail and ears depressed, for he feels that he has been made a fool of. Then the youngsters will shout and clap their hands in glee, to think how clever their favourite "Blackie" is. The blackbird cocks his head on one side, taps the bottom of his cage with his bill, spreads his tail out and dashes over his perches to and fro, at a most furious rate, quite pleased at his own performances. I have known large figures offered for a talented blackbird, belonging to a country lad, such as a brand-new suit of clothes and five shillings as well, all to no purpose. His clothes were the worse for wear, his shoes were as bad as they could be; but for all that, "he warn't a-goin' to let Blackie go."

The rain has ceased falling, and the wind that brought it has died away. All is quiet; things are resting. A light vapour rises from the meadows by the river and floats away; it is the steam from the hot, thirsty earth; the sun is sinking, and the light in slanting rays shines on the wet young foliage, and illumines the rustic spire close at hand. The cattle are quiet; they are enjoying the precious coolness to their hearts' content. Not a sound is

heard save the "chirrup" of the partridge as he calls to his mate in the furrow. Without one single preparatory note, some feathered creature has burst out into glorious song. It is the blackbird, and now from over the river another joins him. As we lean over a field-gate to listen to him, the scent of the fresh-turned furrows comes to us, bringing a feeling of life and health with it. The bird's song rises and falls, to ring out again, if possible, sweeter than before; it brings back to us many memories of happy boyhood and childhood's careless days.

Pepys in his Diary has mentioned the blackbird. On May 22, 1663, he has this passage entered: "Rendall, the house carpenter at Deptford, hath sent me a fine blackbird which I went to see. He tells me he was offered twenty shillings for him as he came along, he do so whistle." On the 23d there is another entry: "Waked this morning between four and five by my blackbird, which whistled as well as ever I heard any; only it is the beginning of many tunes, very well; but then leaves them and goes no further." He is best in his native thickets, that is his proper place and home, but to those who keep him and treat him well, he is as

clever and amusing as any Indian mynah. I prefer him, for more reasons than one; it is impossible to teach a blackbird naughty things, such as a mynah acquires very easily.

The song-thrush, or mavis, is so well known that we need not enter into details to any great extent about him or his ways. As a destroyer of snails we place him in the first rank. He is a gentle bird, and his song is as well known as that of the lark. He, too, like the blackbird, sings after a shower; but his note is a very different one; besides this, he sings far more frequently than the blackbird, and there are more of the former birds about than of the latter. Taking the year all round, we have, at a rough computation, considered that you would see four thrushes to one blackbird. I do not state this as a fact; blackbirds are more hideling birds than thrushes, and far more wary in all their actions; it is only my impression in a general way, after years of observation. The blackbird likes fruit; the song-thrush will have it when there is any; strawberries, raspberries, currants, gooseberries, he will have at any risk if he dies in the attempt, which is frequently the case; cherries, too, he loves dearly.

It is no light task to look after fruit, even when it is all netted and pegged down; for the thrush will peck and scratch a hollow out and step underneath the bough; where one has gone others will follow, and work sad mischief. If a blackbird is under the net, he yells out his frantic alarm as usual: the thrush only clucks. In some gardens from twenty to thirty thrushes are often captured during a day. As at this time they are first-rate eating, they atone for their sins by making a dinner now and then. It is only natural that they should have fruit if they can get it; but one thing I must say, dear lover of birds though I am, if the fruit were not protected and well watched, the blackbirds, thrushes, and missel-thrushes would clear the lot. It is a wonder where they all come from, directly it is ripe, and some even before it is so; they turn up in numbers from all quarters. No more hunting about the meadows and hedgerows for such common things as worms and snails when there are these far more tempting dainties about. It would never do to fire into a tree or bush loaded with fruit; so the gun is not used, only netting. No doubt, poor things, they think if they get in they can get out,

but that is another matter entirely; in nine cases out of ten they never do. Other birds will come to the fruit, but the three we have particularly mentioned are the chief culprits, and they suffer for it. There is not the least fear of their getting scarce; we receive hosts from the Continent each season; they fly to and fro across the Channel.

Thrushes are essentially the choristers of the woodlands, but they will desert their quiet retreat for a tempting gooseberry-bush in a cottage garden.

The fieldfare, or felt, is the dandy of the tribe; for a member of the thrush family, he has a coat of many colours. He is a migrant, shy and wary to a degree, and the favourite game bird with all young sportsmen. At any rate he gives them opportunities of acquiring the cardinal virtue of patience. They must indeed wait for him unless the weather is very severe; and that alters matters considerably. I, and my companions, have tramped many a mile after him in our young days, and brought the gun home safely, without having come to grief, but also without fieldfares.

It is a well-known fact now, or it ought to be

so, that there is a larger and smaller variety of the same species, in some of the bird tribes. I will state one instance, that of the common wheatear; this is well known to the dwellers in the downs that these birds frequent. In our young days we used to shoot, when we could, two varieties of fieldfares, the fieldfare common, and what we in our juvenile fashion called the pigeon fieldfare, or felt; the larger varieties are the rarest. I know opinions are divided on these points, and the matter has been set aside as doubtful, but the facts remain all the same; even now we hear of pigeon felts from some of our old rustic friends. One habit the fieldfare has, which is a very strange one for a thrush, he will roost on the ground; I know this, because I saw a lot once caught in a lark net.

For the gentle redwing, who in his native wilds is called the Norwegian nightingale, we have a tender regard. He is, we think, more dependent on a supply of insect-food in some shape or other, than any other member of his family; the consequence is that in the inclement seasons he suffers severely. I have seen him hunting for a bare sub-

sistence round the edges of brooks in the low-lying water-meadows, and pitied him many a time. He suffers silently; there is no rush and flutter with him, or any struggling to secure the scanty food; he only flutters from one spot to another, gets what he can and makes the best of it. Sometimes he will stay long enough to sing; this takes place very rarely, but he has done so, to my knowledge, in some water-meadows. The bird was perching on the willow-boughs when he sang. It was a wild sweet note, different in all respects from that of the others of his family; it might not have been the full song of the bird; he did not stay there, so no definite conclusion could be arrived at. In one or two instances he has bred in England; this has been proved in the most practical manner, but these instances have been extremely rare. Some winters the redwings are far more numerous than others; in mild winters, we have seen, comparatively speaking, few. No doubt the food-supply influences them to a great degree, for I think our favourite, the gentle redwing, is the most tender of the thrush family.

With White's thrush, the gold-breasted thrush, and the nightingale-thrush, we have nothing to do; for they can barely be called visitors in our land. I have only given a short account of our British thrushes proper.

CHAPTER VII.

IN "THE GOOD OLD TIMES."

BEFORE so much machinery came into use, in the days when labourers were precious in the sight of the farmer, he and his, with the men-servants, usually constituted one large family in our part of the country. How I delighted in "The Coombe," as one of these old-fashioned farmsteads was fitly called, sheltered as it was from the north winds by a hill that rose immediately behind it! The old house was a large, substantial, rambling building. The huge chimney-stacks alone were worth going far to see. Age had given them that peculiar tone of colouring which only the brush, not the pen, can give any idea of. Starry lichens, small patches of stonecrop, larger ones of house-leek, and other

plants that love to fix themselves on ancient brick-work, grew there in luxuriance. As for the brick-work itself, it was all weather-beaten and stained in greys and browns, varied by the vegetable growth, the whole showing a scale of colouring that would drive an inferior artist wild. For the true painter it was a mine of wealth, so far as rich broken tones were concerned.

Day after day a friend of my younger days stood near the old house, adding touch to touch, with skilful hand, on his canvas. I am glad to say that his picture was afterwards hung on the walls at Burlington House, and that it attracted much notice there.

Changes have come—some say for the better—but we are not all carried away, thank God! by those interested agitators who, in their crass ignorance, speak of our true agricultural population as if they were down-trodden serfs. Ranting, empty-headed windbags these intruding strangers have been called by some of us rural folk. In past times, at any rate, there was a stubborn spirit of independence among the genuine sons of the soil that forbade oppression and resented interference. The

new order of things was no doubt inevitable, but it has thrown the working parts of the old machinery completely out of gear. The older members of many of our rural communities speak regretfully of past times. Quite recently I was talking with an old fellow who had served the master of The Coombe for many years. Memories came thick and fast as we smoked a pipe together; and this is how the faithful old farm labourer talked:—

"Ah, you knowed him well; you were about here times enough. Now you'd hardly think it, but I never growed afore I went to live there at The Coombe. It waun't tu be expected as I could shoot up much, seein' as I on'y got two shillin's a-week rook-mindin', though I wus at it from mornin' tu night. Bread, mind ye, wus a terrible price then; an' many an' many a time hev I gone rook-tendin' with on'y a hunch o' bread an' a injun or two in my sotchel fur tu last me all day. When I got home at night, there wus taters an' hard puddin', an' glad enough we wus tu git that. 'Twas a hard scratch tu git much in the shape o' vittles fur the lot on us there wus. The young uns nowadays don't know the meanin' o' hard times.

"Well, I heerd as a carter-boy wus wanted at The Coombe, an' I goes there an' asks fur the place. The master, he looks down on me, an' he eyes me all over. He wus just six foot two in his stockings, you 'member. 'An',' sez he, 'you be a little chap; ken ye eat?' I told him I jest about could ef I could git it. He stood thear, 'siderin' me, when the missus—a good un she wus—sez, 'Try him, father; I think 't is on'y belly timber the poor little chap wants. If he is but little, it ain't no fault o' his, poor chap! an' 't is a fault he'll soon grow out of here.' They wus the werry words she said.

"So he took me inter his sarvice, an' I 'members his fust words after I'd cum jest as if 'twas yesterday. 'Now boy,' he sez, 'eat an' drink as much as ye want, but waste nuthin'. Mind what's said tu ye an' do yer work. Then ye'll git on.' I did git on an' no mistake; an' I growed. He brewed reg'lar, one lot under the other. Two pints a-day, year in an' year out, we got; an' more in harvest-time. It wus good too; real malt an' hops; no swishet, mind ye. An' he killed lots o' pigs, an' cured his own pork an' bacon; but we had butcher's

meat allus twice a-week, an' he made no difference in the livin'. What we had in the big kitchen he had on his own table. He said he waun't a-goin' tu hev two cookin's. Waun't these 'ere big chines what hung up in the big chimbley in the bacon-room prime an' tasty! Many a time would he cum an' bring his knife an' fork an' cut himself a thumb-piece off our chine, cos, he said, he waun't a-goin' tu hev the missus git the cloth laid a purpose fur him when she wus busy. He thought a deal o' the missus an' his darter. As tu rabbuts, we did hev a lot o' them, and we got tired on 'em, though I be 'most 'shamed tu say it.

"I shan't never forgit one mornin' as he had his breakfust off our table in the kitchen; we allus had bacon, an' this 'ere bacon wus brought on fur ye with the rind on, an' you had tu eat it rind an' all; he'd never 'low the rind tu be took off. But that 'ere mornin' two on us waun't in the humour fur it. So we takes it off an' pokes it on one side, thinkin' as he'd not see it. Jest afore we got up tu go tu work again he gits up an' comes round to us. Without a word he gives me a rattlin' clap on th' ear, an' my mate anuther. It med our

eyes twinkle, fur his hand waun't a light un. Then he sez, 'You wasteful young dogs, you've bin chuckin' away the werry best part o' the bacon. Don't ye iver do it again in my house.' More we didn't, I can tell ye; he wus heavy-handed, but he wus a real good un, bless ye."

I could fully endorse this; a true specimen of the honourable old school was the master of The Coombe farm, considerate to man and beast. He never went to bed, winter or summer, before making a last inspection of the stables and the cow-stalls to see that all the stock was properly cared for. He never shirked work himself, and he would suffer no evasion of it on the part of others. I will give an example of the sterling honesty that characterised all his actions. After the wheat had been threshed out, when the measuring took place, if the odd quantity amounted to half a bushel, he would allow the thresher a bushel for it; if it only reached a peck, he claimed it. Then, after the wheat had been placed in the large bins before being put in sacks for the market, he would go up to any one of them haphazard, turn his back on it, put his hand behind him, and take a handful of the grain from the

first lot he touched, walk out of the barn with it, and then—not sooner—it was placed in his sample-bag ready for the morrow's market-day. "If you take it in that way," he would say, "the bulk on it will be sure to tally with the sample."

Pheasants were not so plentiful, round our outlying farms at least, in those days as they are now. Partridges, however, were; and it was the pride of the master of The Coombe to pilot the old squire round his farm to the best coveys when he came to shoot over his fields with his favourite Spanish pointer. Once during the season, in any case, there was a visit paid; for The Coombe farm and lands were rented from the squire.

On one of these occasions the farmer and his landlord had worked back to The Coombe after a good morning's sport. "They should have sent some lunch to meet me," muttered the squire, half to himself.

"Mother will be proud to find ye something, squire; 'tis plain but wholesome."

"Mother" and "darter" were somewhat flustered at having to provide a "snack" for this guest at so short a notice. Not so the master. "What he

gits here wun't hurt him. We've thruv on it, so brush about like good uns."

The snowy cloth is laid in the quaint, cool parlour, with its large china cupboard on one side, and on the other an old oak table with the ponderous family Bible, upon which always lies "father's" spectacle-case. A few bright flowers gathered by "darter" give a bright finish to the restful look of the room, which feels cool and pleasant to the old squire after the morning's work.

In and out flit mother and daughter, just showing themselves for a moment, as they hope their guest can put up with farmhouse fare. No doubt as to that, the squire assures them heartily. When the cloth has been removed, the master of The Coombe appears in his church-going clothes, carrying a tray, on which is a bottle and a long, deep glass.

"Squire," he said, "I consider yer do me an honour in eating an' drinking in my house. Will ye oblige me by tasting my own special cider?"

This was manufactured entirely under the master's eye; in fact, mainly by himself from choicest fruit that came from special trees, the pride of Coombe orchard, carefully gathered. He always

bottled and rebottled it; and the result was that it was styled in our district "beyond compare."

The cork was drawn gently, the neck of the bottle tilted over the long glass; a gentle gurgle, and then the amber fluid filled it, clear and sparkling, countless bubbles rising to the surface.

The squire sipped, his eyes twinkled, then he drained the glass. With a long "Ah!" followed by "Splendid!" he denoted his intense admiration of the generous liquid.

Afterwards, at his own dinner-table, that luncheon, and especially the cider, was expatiated on fully, and in order to mark his appreciation, one of his daughters was despatched next day to The Coombe. She arrived unattended, delivering with her own kindly hands two brace of birds and a bottle of the squire's old port, with his compliments.

I have given this little instance, as one among many, to show the excellent understanding that existed often between good landowners, gentry of the olden time, and their farmer tenants. If anything needed talking over together, they had opportunity for doing so; and it was rarely the

case that a satisfactory arrangement was not arrived at.

As for the agricultural labourers, masters and men were not so far apart. Long service was a common thing in those days; it is unusual now. Farms change hands now at short notice, and, owing to eventualities that no amount of forecast can provide against, great numbers of the fine old homesteads have been pulled down to make room for modern mansions, built by capitalists who have bought up the properties that were once owned by old gentry of the type I have sketched. I, for one, fear that, if this rapid way of living and of doing things continues, there will be little rest and comfort left, and little good work produced. In the old days there was time for everything, and folks lived their life.

The old order of things is passing away, day by day; the changes come, ever faster. It is a rare thing now to hear the sound of the flail on the threshing-floor; a flail will soon be only regarded as a curiosity. Townfolk, who know little or nothing about the country, talk of the "yokel" or countryman in a sneering manner: but, as a rule,

he is strong and hearty, rising early and going early to bed; plain in speech, prompt in action where help is needed, and kind so far as his means will allow him to be. Once gain his confidence and he will never forget you; go where you may, he will welcome your return. His consideration and delicacy where the feelings of others are concerned would surprise many a so-called lady or gentleman of our towns.

Even some of the "Wussers," as they called them down our way, are really good-hearted at the bottom. One ne'er-do-weel I remember, whose only social fault was shooting at all the game he came across, without a licence; for which offence he was detained and well looked after at one of his country's model institutions for that purpose. We had passed each other often in the pursuit of our several avocations with a pleasant greeting, and this was the extent of our mutual acquaintance.

One evening a thunderstorm came on suddenly, and the rain fell in torrents, so that I had to seek shelter under some trees. As I stood there, wondering how I should get through it, my friend came

along in a great waterproof coat. Catching sight of me he said: "Ye're in a fix; I know it wun't leave off; we're in fur a night's rain, an' ye'll git soaked through an' through, an' git laid up per'aps. Ye don't look as if ye could stan' it like me; take this 'ere coat o' mine—we're both on us near the same size."

I bade him keep it; he would get wet himself.

"Well, an' if I do, it wun't hurt me, fur I'm handy home, an' you've a good six mile to go afore you gits there. I don't know yer name, but I knows where ye're stoppin'. Ye can bring it back in the mornin'; I'm sure to meet ye."

After that we became better acquainted, and he gave me many bits of his personal history.

"I don't let my old folks know my movements," he said; "fur ye see it works 'em if they thinks I'm arter anything. Somehow or other I can't help it, not when I thinks I'll hev a turn. When that fit comes on I hev it, an' take my chance as a matter o' coorse. They've had me a time or two, not often, but quite enuf. Last time they med it a little bit warm, just to mek a sample of me, as they said. Them places ain't much to stop at; the grub ain't

nothin' pertickler, an' there ain't none too much on it, nor yet no baccer nor no beer. The old folks wud ha' paid the fine, but I said 'No.' I was bad enough as 'twas, without their payin' fur it, poor old souls. I was sorry fur mother, fur I knowed she'd fret all the time I was away; but 'tain't no good cryin' over spilt milk. I ain't done nothin' wuss than a bit o' poachin' now an' agin. There's a lot does that, an' a good many as you'd hardly think, on'y they doesn't git cotched."

As we saw more of each other, Ralph and I found we had much in common; he was a first-class field naturalist, and knew more about wild creatures than many men whose names are mentioned with reverence in that connection. A true type he was of that large class of men born with an inherent passion for sport. I believe myself that ninety out of every hundred born and reared in the country are sportsmen at heart, and it is most hard to repress that instinct. Speak to any one man who comes from the woods and streams on the subject. Only mention a rod or gun, and he will wax eloquent on the subject. I venture to state the passion is natural to any healthy subject who has the use of his

faculties. I have the complaint myself to a large extent still; at one time I had it seriously.

Some, however, who live in and by the woods are not destructive, although sportsmen and naturalists. They watch the creatures more for amusement, regarding them as the companions of their lonely labour. If a particular bird or beast is required for a definite purpose, they "hev 'em," as they say.

At one time I found much pleasure and interest in the friendship of a fine old couple—a woodman, past-master in his craft, a fine specimen of his class, over seventy years of age, but strong and erect, with a clear grey eye that was always alert and watchful; the wife, every way his equal, a genuine country woman, pure and simple. Their cottage was clean as a new pin; all its appointments were in perfect order; the fires made on the hearths —no grates; and I can tell you, if you want to enjoy a meal, go into the woods first to get an appetite, and perhaps to catch your game; then come home and broil it over wood embers—to my mind the sweetest of all cooking.

They had reared a large family, who had gone out into the world; all but two, who, as the mother told

me, were "laid in the chapel ground under the hill. Father and me has gone there reg'lar fur many years."

I had often met them there before I got to know them. The congregation was a very earnest and simple-hearted one; a gathering for worship it was which often made me think of the old Puritans one reads of, in their American homes. Once during the week, and twice on Sunday, the woodlanders were to be seen coming through the tall firs and along the woodland roads to their plain little chapel; gathering in groups outside before the time for service they might be heard exchanging such greetings as "How are ye, neighbour?" "How goes matters with ye?" "Are ye at peace?" "That last sermon as he giv us left matters to ponder on, mind ye; 'twas stirrin'—ay, to the marrer o' yer bones. 'Twas a gran' sermon fur one so young."

Then they greet their pastor as he comes up the chapel path, and enter after him. The hymn having been given out, the fresh, clear voices of a choir of young women only lead the singing, the pure, bell-like tones of one, who it is said will soon be

the pastor's wife, sounding distinct above the rest. I have never enjoyed the singing of any choir as I did that, composed only of those women's voices.

The young minister preached in plain words and a manly fashion the Word of God; no fancies of his own, no fine-spun theories, but the practical sense of the words as applied to their condition of life. No thunderings of the law; no excommunication of the erring; with these he pleaded, holding up to them the humanity that was Divine; the One who was human above all others, who said to the woman "Go, and sin no more." He tried his best to show them that religion was not a thing for one day of the week, but part and parcel of their lives, to be shown in their bearing towards each other, and their every action. To the aged and the weary and the suffering ones he talked of rest; looking the while into their faces as though he were their son instead of their preacher.

They passed out of the chapel with a few remarks on what they had heard; there were friendly leave-takings, and then the little congregation broke up and lost itself in the woodlands. The young pastor died before he had reached his prime, and

the woman he loved followed him in the course of a few months.

Old Maurice—"father," as his wife always called him—and I had many a chat together over the wild creatures, which he said were not so plentiful as they were in his young days. "Little farms, ye see, as used to be all round about, is throwed into big uns. Them big hedges is grubbed up, and the dykes, what run up most on 'em, are all filled and levelled, and the shelter and feed for 'em is clean gone. Another thing, more timber is thrown now. They've made reg'lar havick of it on some estates to git money. No matter where you throw timber, all creeturs within sound on it will move on somewhere else; 'tis just like pullin' the houses down over people's heads. The place may be chock-full on 'em, but soon as you begins to fall the trees they tells one and another all round there's mischief about, an' they leaves it, so as you wun't find one.

"Another thing is that in my young days the gentry used to shoot the game with pineters [pointers] or else setters; now they're threshed out an' knocked over in heaps. They was contented in my time with a fair day's shootin'; but

now I reckons 'tis reg'lar slaughter, nothin' done moderate. Folks and creeturs could both live then, now 'tis reg'lar harrien', all the lot on it. They wants me to do too much at once nowadays, all on it in a hurry. Now, to tell by yer face an' the colour of yer hair ye've sin somethin' of the world; what do you think about these 'ere things?"

I tell him that much as I deplore the loss of wild creatures, and the breaking up of their haunts and homes, I do honestly believe that, taking all things into consideration, we have improved greatly, and the present generation are reaping the benefit of the changes. The laws are more strictly enforced, property is more secure, and human life too. Knowledge is more accessible to all who wish to gain it; and in every way men and women are more free to act and think than they were years ago. So that on the whole we are in a state of improvement, and things are working for the best all round.

"Ay, 'tis as you say, some of the changes is for the better. When mother here was a gal, and I was a young shaver, there was a desprit gang in the forest. Banded together they was fur all that was bad—real desprit they was. Old Tom and me

knows the places where they used to hide their plunder. It was no matter to them what it was—game, or sheep, or any mortal thing. All our folks round here was in real dread of that lot, and if they thought you'd said anything about what you'd seen of their doings when you'd bin working in the forest, they'd threaten to kill ye, and more than that, they'd do it, when they'd the chance! Mother recklects one of the wust of 'em being warned off the medders where the trout-stream runs through. He'd bin after the trout and took a lot. The miller that was there in those days was a mettlesome man, and he didn't care a brass button fur the best man among 'em, if it came to a fair stand-up tussle; but that warn't their game; they was a murderin', skulkin' lot, and what they did was done in the dark. A week arter that lot had bin warned off, the miller was woke up by what he took to be a woman's voice screaming fur help under the winder of his sleepin' room. He jumps out o' bed and opens the winder, shouting out as he did it: 'What is it? I'm coming!'

"It was that varmint he'd warned off his medders, and as soon as the miller showed hisself he took

aim and fired at him from where he was in hiding. It warn't to be, however; 'twas a flint-gun he'd got, same as they all had then in these parts, and it flashed in the pan. By the light of that flash the miller seed his face as plain as if 'twere daylight. He kept quiet though, and never showed that night as he'd seen him. Only next day they had him, fur the miller was well liked by all the folks round, high and low, and they was all up in arms together. 'Twas proved agin him, and he was sent to Botany Bay. There warn't no model prisons in those days, and he was transported fur life, and good riddance. The rest of his gang swore all manner of vengeance on the miller, but the mill was too well looked arter fur them to come sneakin' round; they knowed they'd shoot 'em down like dogs, his men would, if they offered to molest the master.

"But they could kill a man's stock or injure it if they couldn't hurt himself. There was one of 'em I knowed well went by the name of Moocher. They all had nicknames, and they called him that because he was allus a-mouching round, like a hungry fox, grabbing hold of anything he could. If ever

there was a thief, he was one and no mistake. He'd rob his own father and mother just as soon as he would any one else. He was a terrible pill to one farmer, as had a farm that was hemmed in all round by the woods. One day he was catched where he'd no business to be, and the farmer sez to him—

"'What are you after here, Moocher?'

"And he sez—

"'I'm watchin' my shadder go along in front of me. Ain't it a long un? And ain't it curous yer shadder should go in front, eh? And ain't it curous what a lot o' things some people have more than others. 'Tain't possible they can want it all. Now jest you look at my shadder.'

"'I expected to find you stealing around,' sez the farmer.

"'Did ye now? Ain't I glad I didn't disappoint ye, then.'

"That just about did it.

"'Moocher,' he cries, 'ye thievin', sneakin' varmint, if I had my will I'd hound ye, an' the cowardly, murderin' crew as ye belong to down, with bloodhounds!'

"'Everybody knows what a kind, tender-hearted

critter ye be,' sez Moocher; 'it's a wonder ye have the heart to kill yer fowls before ye roast 'em. What a lot ye have got, to be sure!'

"'You shall have a notice writ, and brought ye by the constable, to keep off my land,' roars the farmer.

"'Oh, shall I? Well, let it be writ big an' plain, for I ain't no scollard. It ain't to be reckoned on as I should be. 'Twere only t'other day some on 'em said I wurn't able to tell the difference 'twixt what was mine an' what was other folkses; but they must ha' bin jokin'.'

"The farmer's lawyer sent him a note sayin' he must keep off of his lands. Moocher said it was a pictur', it was writ so plain. A week arter that the farmer was woke up by the blaze of his rickyard all afire. The horns was sounded, and the folks all came helping; but there warn't too many of 'em. The farmer see a man marchin' to and fro in the main road; he runs out to ask him to help, and finds it was Moocher.

"'Now, then,' he sez, 'give a hand here!'

"He was flustered, ye know. Moocher grinned at him like a devil, and sez he—

"'I jest should like to help, that I should; but I

don't dare. I've got the notes to keep off them lands in my pocket, an' I don't dare. Ain't it a nice fire? Don't it warm a body? Ain't it jest comfortable? I might ha' helped but fur this 'ere note; but I don't dare. Ye might get them blood-hounds out arter me, bein' so tender-hearted as you be. No, you jist go and have a flick at it yourself.'

"It was never proved as Moocher set the place afire, but he had the credit on it. Soon arter that he catched cold through bein' out o' nights, and he died.

"Some of that crew smuggled, and they was allus well primed with liquor afore starting on any of their black work. The one that did most o' the smugglin' was the best scollard among 'em, and he'd got a nice smooth tongue on him. Night and early morning mostly the smugglers come up on the moor from the coast. Sometimes from Sussex way, another time from Hampshire, with their pack-horses, an' their tubs slung on each side on 'em. Along the bottoms of the hills, in the hollers, I've watched 'em come when I've hid up in the tangle. There was other tracks they had, through gentry's grounds as you'd little suspect. It don't do to say

much about that, not even now. Arter a while a man was found floating in a mill-pool, one as was well known to ha' had some words with 'em. He'd seen some o' their doings and spoken on 'em. Nobody never knowed rightly how the body come there. One day mother here was standing at the door of her father's house, when the fog lay thick on the moor; it lifted an' rolled over in one heavy cloud, and showed her the whole gang o' smugglers passing by. She said she was jest upset with fear. Another time I see 'em come down one o' the hollers, an' I recklect I hid up till they was all gone. Now an' agin they'd leave a little keg o' spirits at any one's door they wanted to keep friends with. There'd be a kick at the door in the evening when 'twas dark, and when they knowed a man was alone; an' when he went to see who 'twas, he'd find the stuff snug agin the door.

"At last one on 'em was cotched red-handed, an' the man that owned the house he lived in with another lot, was that mad, he said he'd pull the place down. 'I'll unearth an' unroof the varmints,' sez he; 'they shan't have no hidin'-place on any land o' mine.' So they mucked 'em out,

neck an' crop. In the big kitchen fireplace they found a large flagstone level with the floor, with an iron ring let in the middle; on the top of it was another stone. Our fires is never out, winter nor summer, ye know; we burns wood. The fire burns flat on the hearth; an' when ye comes down in the morning there's allers live embers there; all ye has to do is to put some spray on, and rake them up a bit. That smugglin' lot kept the embers over they stones, an' sometimes they burned a bit; but their regular fire was in another place.

"The landlord had the stone grubbed up, and underneath they found a cellar. The stuff they got there they divided amongst 'em, and the gang duresn't say nothing about it, for the gentry round said as they should be hunted down like foxes; though, as a rule, they never meddled with them as lived near: 'twas mostly the gentry's houses furder as suffered.

"One o' they drove up to London in his carriage, an' he see the head people at Bow Street—his valet it was told us—and a while arter that some new, rough-lookin' customers was sin moochin' an'

wanderin' round. To look at they was a more desprit-looking lot than the old uns. They got in tow with 'em quick too, and told 'em as they could take all as they could git, and would find 'em a better price by a long way than what they'd bin gettin'. They brought fast-trottin' ponies an' light spring-carts to take the game an' other things away. Some o' th' old gang, jist to see what stuff the new chums was made on, in case a scrimmage came, kicked up a row an' hit some on 'em. They was soon satisfied, however, fur they hit out most terrible, an' some on 'em they throwed up on their backs, with a turn o' the foot like, enuf to bust 'em. Arter that they would do anything to please 'em; an' the new uns, jest to prove to 'em as all was right an' square, turned gold over to 'em, as earnest fur the jobs they had before 'em.

"When everything was ready for action like, they planned a housebreakin' job fur one thing, an' a game-harryin' bit fur another; all on it to come off the same night. The night afore that, they'd done some sheep-stealin'. They was bold over it, fur they killed 'em in the fold an' they dressed 'em there, an' left the skins. The night come, an' they

was full swing at their bad work, with the ponies an' carts close handy, when a whistle was blowed. All at once the new mates collared 'em an' clapped a pistol to the head o' each on 'em. Other men rushed up from some hidin'-place, an' the handcuffs was on 'em in a jiff, afore they knowed where they was. 'Twas a rum lot o' game the carts took off that night. They was missed but not wanted, and nobody knowed whear they'd got to, till it leaked out as they'd got 'em all right, an' meant a-keepin' on 'em.

"Noosepapers was scarce in those days, and noose travelled slow. Precious few could read if they'd got the papers; this was an out-o'-the-way sort o' place, and is now, for that matter. Anyhow, we knowed later on as all the gang got transported fur that night's work, an' fur what they'd done afore. Two on 'em, thinkin' to get off light, split on t'others. None on 'em was ever sin round here agin, an' fur the fust time fur many years the foresters could sleep in peace.

"Years has gone by since then, an' the families as they left behind has growed up long ago, an' had families o' their own. What's bred in the bone'll

out in the flesh, an' the folks round the forest allus looked cool on 'em, till they cleared out too, an' went elsewhere.

"So that's a change for the better, as we've sin, mother an' me. 'Tis no use sayin' as times is wuss every way than they was."

CHAPTER VIII.

BY THE MILL-STREAM.

Our mill-stream—the Tillingbourne, in point of fact, —at first a mere rill, having its source on the top of the moor, hidden in many places by a tangled growth of fern, heath, and rushes—as it grows, forms here and there small pools, clear as crystal—dipholes, as the cottagers call them. Almost from its source you will see trout in it if you look well, small ones but very lively, the largest weighing, perhaps, three ounces. Where the run of water is clear of undergrowth, you may see them rush up in a shoal when startled. Either from want of food, or perhaps from overcrowding, they do not grow larger here. With the exception of a black-cock or a wood-pigeon coming to drink, and that not often, little of bird-life is to be seen.

At the bottom of the moor the stream widens into a pond surrounded by fir-trees, noted for the size and quality of its trout. Then through woods and broken ground it runs a clear, sharp stream, following which we come suddenly on the mill-house, which is almost hidden among trees. In front the stream has formed a lake, the sides covered with rush and reed, the home of the water-rail, moor-hen, and pike. Quack, quack! a splash, and with her head and body stretched flat out on the water, a duck has just given the alarm to her young ones, striking the water up with her wings. Helter-skelter they scuttle for the reeds; one is too late. A swirl in the water, a downward, vicious snatch, and Mr Pike has duck for lunch.

A very good thing it is the miller did not see that duckling go, it might have ruffled the sweetness of his disposition; and we intend asking permission to walk through his meadows and look at the trout-stream.

Before knocking at the mill-door we look round for a moment at the perfect picture which presents itself. The old mill is grey, its wheel covered over with moss. As with most of the mills hereabouts,

the water falls on the top of the wheel—overshot is the term for it. Lying below is the house, and the garden full of fruit-trees, flowers, and vegetables. Trees, house, and mill are all covered with moss of many tints.

"Good morning," sounds from behind, and turning round we see the miller looking at us over the half-door. Returning his greeting, we ask permission to walk along his stream.

"Well, I don't hardly know what to say about it; are you one of them artist chaps?"

"No."

"That's all right, then, so far. I don't hackle to 'em much. Three of 'em come here last week and asked me if they could paint the old mill. Well, of course, I said they could if they liked. They was youngish chaps to look at, but what puzzled me was they all had glasses on and smoked big pipes. I never see the pipes out of their mouths all the time they was about here. It wasn't long they stayed. First they walked all over the place to get the best point of sight, as they called it. Then they set to work for a bit, then got up and looked at what the others had bin dooin', and begun to

talk pretty loud about effect and tones—all dog-Latin to me; more talk than work, a lump of it! It worked me a bit to hear so much jaw going on. I thought to myself, If you go on at this rate you'll paint the old mill to death, and no mistake about it! So I just went round to the yard and untied my dog. When he come here, as it might be, I throwed a stick in towards that lot, and he landed close to 'em and shook himself. That 'toned' 'em middlin', and they used words which sounded rough to me, considerin' they wore spectacles. They haven't been here since."

Before I had time to reply to this, a man calls the miller on one side and says something which does not reach me.

Returning to me, he says, "Yes, you can go; my man knows you, and as he is going down some of the way, he will show you where my ground runs to."

"Thank you."

"Oh, you are welcome to go, or you would not have got leave, I can tell you!"

My new companion smiled, and said, "Yes, mister, I have seen you before; the people you

have been living with since you came about this part of the country are related to me. You have kept the old couple pretty cheerful since they have had you in the house, they tell me."

Presently he said, "If you see master when you come round again, don't say anything to him about trout."

"Very well. But why?"

"I'll tell you. Did you notice the foot-bridge below the wheel? Well, just above that, close to the wall, there was a big trout. He used to play in a hole, and master used to feed him; so did I. He would come for it. He was a size, and no mistake! He would have weighed something by this time if he had lived. Master was right down proud of him, and no mistake! He give us all strict orders not to meddle with him. We let him alone, but some one else come and interfered with him a bit. It was like this: A young chap come down here for his health and to study; they said he was going to be a parson. Well, our people go to chapel regular; so did he. After a bit they got acquainted like; he used to come to tea, and so on. I used to think he moved about middlin'

sharp if his health was rather delicate. They give him leave to fish anywhere below the foot-bridge. So he did. Never used to catch anything worth taking home for a cat to feed on; we reckoned him up as a poor hand at it. Thursday come round as usual, master and the missus had gone to market, and I was out with the cart. There was only a boy in the mill, and nothing had been said to him about that tame trout. The boy knew that he had leave to fish, so he only looked out of the mill-window at him. He walked up from the meadow, rod in hand, and stood on the foot-bridge. One throw straight as a line, and he had hooked him! That boy has seen a tidy lot in the fishin' way, but he told me he never see such quick work with a big fish as that young man in delicate health made with master's big trout. From what he seed of him he must have been over seven pounds weight. When master got out at the station, comin' back from market, the porter told him the young gentleman had gone back to town. 'He was quite well again,' he said; 'and, if I'm any judge of a fish, by only seein' the tail, he'd the biggest trout in a basket ever I see in my life!"

"I will say good morning to you here; but, mind you, don't say anything to master about trout."

And now we are in the meadows, where the stream runs through. You can see at a glance it is only reclaimed moorland. The turf is mossy and springs from under the foot; if you pull up some, peat shows at once, full of fine fibre. Alder-bushes are dotted here and there, and clumps of rushes all over the surface. From the stream run little dykes in various directions through the meadows, where some time or other water-cress has been grown. Walking on we see something spring up before us with a whip-whip-whip! Our first thought is that the place is alive with young snipe: ridiculous idea! for they are but frogs, the very princes of their family, however: never before have we seen such splendid specimens. They are of a rich sienna yellow, spotted and streaked with purple-brown, and very large in size, and they look more like snipe than frogs as they leap from the ground. They jump like kangaroos. Strange to say, you do not find them near the water, but in

the middle of the meadow, squatting like birds, in the moss and peat-fibre, where it is very warm; and they evidently find plenty to eat, for they are plump for frogs. Why they prefer the middle of the meadow to the water, where they are generally supposed to be, is best known to themselves. I certainly have never seen that variety of the frog family near water in the heat of summer.

Let us examine one of the narrow dykes; there is a current running through all of them. As a general rule they are about a foot in depth, except where a wooden spout has decayed, and, being removed, left a hole. Coarse grass grows in tufts along the sides, and dips into the water in many places. The bottom is clear from weeds, and only a few stones are to be seen on it here and there. Into one hole, deeper than the rest, we look very cautiously for some time. A water-shrew, or bubble-mouse, has been swimming across the bottom, poking his sharp nose under all the little bits of stone and stick in his way, and is now making for the spot we are looking at; he darts back quicker than he came, as a trout swims out from the bank and goes back again, but not

before he has shown himself sufficiently to let us see he is a good fish—a two-pounder, if not more.

The dykes are not really so small as they look, for the run of water has undermined the peaty banks on either side as much as two and three feet, making holes in some parts of considerable depth, fine harbours for the trout. The large ones come up these water-runs, where they find plenty to eat, from the stream; and make their homes in them. Now and then, at night, they return to it to play about a little. If alarmed, they rush up the runs like a flash; you might fish the stream for a week and get nothing larger than herrings; you would not find even that size in the dykes, for this reason, a large trout will not allow one smaller than himself to come near the place he has made his home. Knowing full well that where we find one we can find more, let us cease our inspection of the dykes, and walk over the last meadow towards the road which takes us home.

Two kingfishers are flying up the stream, sounding their curious cry; and two shrikes are perched on one of the alder-bushes, uttering their chac-chac-

chac! With these exceptions, few birds are to be seen by the trout-stream.

We are now on the road, and stand looking up the meadows; all round there are woods and hills, with farmhouses and cottages here and there, and the old mill in the distance. These, with the green meadows and the flashing trout-stream, make a picture you are not likely to forget; it has been depicted already by a well-known Royal Academician.

As we walk up a shady lane a man comes out from a copse through a gate; it is our old acquaintance, the keeper,—a keen observer of all living creatures.

"I thought it was you in the meadow, somehow," is the greeting. "Have you had a talk with the miller?"

"Yes."

"Did he say anything about them three artist chaps?"

"Yes, a bit."

"Did he tell you about the beehive?"

"No."

"I will, then. I see him this morning; he said somebody that I knowed was in the meadows. One

of them artist chaps walked round the garden, gunnin' about to get the best view, as he called it; got a umbrella and a lot of sticks, tied up under his arm somethin' like a sweep's machine, only a different colour. Well, he run right up aginst a hive with his machine, anyhow; didn't see where he was poking to; it was middlin' bad, by all accounts, for a time —made 'em downright mad; bees can't bear to have their hives knocked—his wife heard 'em swarm out, and come to see what was the matter. One of the bees stung her on the side of the nose, that's why he sent the dog in the water to move 'em. 'Prentices to the trade out for a holiday, I should fancy. They won't come round next week, or the week after, I'll warrant. Have ye heard about his tame trout?"

"Yes."

"That young fellow came down here for his health, eh? He come for that fish, mister."

The keeper looks at me, bursts out into a hearty peal of laughter, and continues—

"I never told you what my lad Joe took you for when you come here first, did I? Well, you'll only laugh, so here goes. Joe was getting ant's eggs for the birds, up in the furze, and see you coming. He

said you'd got a bird-nest in your hands and was looking as pleased as a little kid. He watched you; presently he said you stopped and picked up a feather, and looked at it for some time. Then you sits down on a fir-log and begins to put somethin' down in a book. He was middlin' curious; you frightened him, though you didn't know he was near you; for when he come across me he said, 'There's a furriner or else a looneytic up in the firs; for he picks up feathers and then does somethin' in a book, and what do ye think he'd got round his neck? No, it weren't no hankercher at all, it were a menjous big snake, and he was a-chirpin' and a-whistlin' to it.' Joe said he got away quick; you remember, maybe, about it."

"I do; it was my tame snake."

Presently the talk ran on kingfishers.

"They can run up and down the stream and do what they like now my fish are moved," says the gamekeeper. "They very nearly got me in a bother —they would, too, if I hadn't stopped them. Here's one, the last one from the place—look at it!"

It was a shapeless lump of feathers. "That's the way to serve 'em out when they gets troublesome.

The squire, you see, had some trout sent him—young ones from Scotland."

"From Lochleven, I suppose?"

"Yes, that's the name. Well, he gives me strict orders to put 'em up in the copse where the springs are, for 'em to get big enough to turn out. There's a open place about the size of a table, clean, sandy bottom; you could see a pin, it's that clear. The bushes are all round it, a nice, quiet place. I turns 'em in there and looks at 'em twice a-day, sometimes more. After a bit I misses some of them young trout. I tackled Joe about it; he told me he'd never bin near the place, and there was no ducks or moor-hens about. So one mornin' I gets in the copse and watches—made a hide for myself with boughs close to the place where I turned the trout in. I wasn't kept waiting very long before I heard a kingfisher come up soundin' his rattle. He shoots over the copse and perches on a twig right over the trout. He cocked his head on one side—and then—click! and another was gone. It fairly bothered me what to do; presently a thought come into my head like.

"I chanced to have some galvanised netting at

home, smallish mesh to it. Off I starts to get it. When I got back that kingfisher, or one like him, flew by with another trout. So I just cut some pegs and fixed the netting over the spring, close to the water. Then I hid up. Back comes Mister Kingfisher, perches on the same twig, and down he goes, bang. He got more than he reckoned for. After hooking him off with a stick I came away. In the evening there was another, that one you looked at just now, makes five that have gone wrong. I've heard gents talk before to-day about the balance of nature, and all that; but when such customers as they kingfishers are likely to get you in a bother if you don't stop 'em, the only thing you can do is to upset the balance of nature, same as I have. Kingfishers look well in a case, when they are stuffed, mind you; but to be where young trout are they're not up to much, I can tell you. You can't blame them because they're fond of trout, it's their nature to be, and you'll find the only way to get natur' out of anything is to knock it out, same as I have out o' them. I believe all creeturs are made for some purpose or other, or else they wouldn't be about, mind you. These things pop in my head

when I'm walkin' round at times. If they can get what they want easy they'll have it. You catch any wild creetur goin' away for a thing when they can get it close to 'em, they know better than that; and the better it is the better they like it. Them kingfishers might have got any amount of minners; but no, they must get at them trout.

"A gent that comes down here shootin' give me one o' them nateral history books. It was kind of him to do it, and I've read it; and I'll tell you what my reckonin' up about it is. The picters are the best part of it. Here's a picter of a kestrel—windfanners we call 'em—and a good un it is, too, but the readin' seems to spoil it somehow, for the gent that wrote the book says the windfanner feeds on mice and cockchafers and don't interfere with birds; and he don't belong to the hawk tribe, because he's a falcon. One of 'em has had three of my young birds that was runnin' round about the coop; they was a good size, too. Joe told me he had all three in one day. I knowed about the time he'd be round, not before the birds was put out. He come for another this mornin', but he got somethin' that upset him a bit. I shot him dead as he was

pouncin' down. He ain't knocked about, and you can have him to draw in that book of yours. You and I have a goodish bit of a chat at times when we meet, and I find we looks at things pretty much in the same way. One thing I know, so do you, if gentlemen want to see sylvan ornaments—that's the name, ain't it?—about the place, it's no good their grumblin', because they gets their livin' off it. If they has strict views about the game the other things must go. There ain't no help for it, that's certain. They was made to catch things, and catch 'em they will."

Herons are spoken of. I ask if they trouble him in the autumn months. Giving me a sharp look, he says, "Yes, they give me a lot of trouble; where they come from gets over me. The trout run up the dykes and the moor-stream, from all quarters, to spawn. Then the varmints get 'em easy. Anything of a herrin'-size goes down clean. The big uns they drives a hole through, and gets 'em to pieces after. I'm busy at that time, for my chap Joe and some of the others goes round about the place with a sort of water-cart the squire had sent him from some society he belongs to, and they

gets all the big uns out and puts 'em in the big trout-pond. Every big varmint about the place, what there is left of 'em, knows when the trout run up. Foxes gets hold of the big trout easy in some places where they run; the water don't cover 'em. They like fish when it comes handy to 'em.

"Them herons are the worst of the lot. One of the gents told me they was thought a lot of in times gone by, and belonged to a ancient family, and they ought to be protected. That is the way he said it. And if herons was destroyed as they had been the race would die out, and a connectin'-link in nature would be lost. I only wish it was lost, or that he had to keep that ancient family, as he called 'em—when the trout run up, anyway. It reads nice in print when their friends reads what they write; but they don't do keeperin for a livin', or they'd drop talk like that!

"Joe told me you was goin' away from these parts soon. Well, he'll miss you certain, for he's reg'lar took to ye, if he did take ye for a looneytic first off. So shall I, for the matter o' that. You draw in that book of yours and put things down only to amuse

yourself and a few friends because you're fond of all live things?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's time wuss wasted than doin' that. Did ye ever send any of it to be printed?"

"Not a line."

"Quite as well perhaps ye didn't, the way you looks at things. One place where I was keeper before I come about here—it's some time ago now—master used to have a friend come to see him, a reg'lar nat'ralist, a big gun, no mistake! Well, he showed me some of his books. There was a lot of it wrong; I proved it to be so. What then? I got the sack. People that never see things, and then give a full and pertic'lar account, knows more about 'em than men that have watched their movements all their lifetime, you may depend on't."

I bid my friend good night, and promise to see him again before I go. The old cottage comes in sight, and I am glad of it, feeling a little tired after my wanderings by the mill-stream.

CHAPTER IX.

ON FOWLERS AND WILD-FOWLING.

FIRST on our list of wild-fowlers come that class who shoot to fill the stomachs of those at home, either with the fowl themselves or with the money these bring when sold. When I was young, money was much more hardly earned than it is now; and it required no small amount of manœuvring on the part of the fowlers, and a very accurate knowledge of the different localities along our coast, with their varying food-supplies, to meet with even an ordinary amount of success.

In my native fishing village, wild-fowling and fishing were almost inseparably connected; even the mechanics of our community were devoted to both of these pursuits, so far as their daily callings

permitted. The men of the coast-line are a distinct race. Whether they hail from Romney Marsh or from the wild shores of Northumberland, they quickly fraternise when they come across each other; and although their dialects may differ, their mode of thought and habits of life are the same. They change little. I have just returned from a visit to the dreary flats, and found them swept over by the storms that have lashed round our shores of late. The men were just what they were in my boyhood, in thought and action entirely unlike the folks dwelling inland.

Naturalists they do not profess to be; but they know all the fowl, web-footed and hen-footed, and their plumage, sex, haunts, and habits, as well as any farmer's wife knows the ways of her own poultry. I have before me a list of the wild-fowl, with their local names. To mention a few of the family of the divers, we have the *sprat diver*, the *magpie diver*—this bird's plumage being black and white,—and again the little *magpie diver*, the morillon or *rattle-wings*, and the *buffle-headed duck*—called by our folks "the harlekin," because this bird springs and dives like a flash. The "cussed"

redshank or pool-snipe was dubbed the *red-legged yelper*, with very good reason. Wild geese, the Brent goose excepted, were all called grey geese, a very comprehensive title with the shooters.

Our line of coast was, from its formation, peculiarly adapted to all the fowl that visited our shores. Where sea-grass grows and the succulent salt-water algæ flourish, the fowl congregated in past times, and they do so now in diminished numbers, to feed on these plants. A great amount of wild country is still left to us; I have lately returned from parts where some who have challenged my statements would have been found dead, if they had attempted to travel over them in the gloaming. Quicksands and morasses are still numerous enough within thirty miles of London, to say nothing about wilder country beyond. In fifty years' time these morasses may be drained; but the wild hillsides covered with firs and heather will remain as they have ever been, the feeding and playing grounds of our wild creatures. Man has tried to cultivate some of this wild ground, and has failed in all his efforts. The marks of his ploughshare can yet be seen in places, showing this. They must remain what

they have always been, health-giving to man, as well as affording satisfaction to his craving for the beautiful.

A bitter nor'-easter has been blowing all the day; the tide has flowed and ebbed again, but not one shooter from the fishing village has been down with his gun to the shore, although a few have taken to the sea-wall—the present writer with them—to see how things are looking. It is a very poor look-out indeed, for the wind blows the water off the sea in sheets, and delivers it to us in the shape of a blinding salt spray, that makes the tears run down one's face, and gives a sensation as if hot needles were pricking one. There is no use in trying to bear it; if we do not leave the top of the wall we shall be blown off it, so we crouch at its foot, to the leeward side, of course. As we sit there, fowling reminiscences are brought up: "It wus jest sich a day as this here," remarks one of the party, "that old Splashey busted his six-footer." Splashey was a sporting shoemaker, who owned the longest fowling-gun in the village. He was also noted for wearing the most dilapidated shoes. No matter if it rained in torrents, out he would bolt, precisely at

ten o'clock, to get his half-pint of porter in those wretched "crab-shells." Flip, flop, splash, he went, hence his nickname of "Splashey." When he went out shooting, however, he always put on waterproof fishing-boots.

"Yes, it wus jest about sich a day as this—it couldn't be a wusser, nohow—thet old Splashey, an' me, an' Josher Hulldown, an' Old Craft cum down for sum geese. My boy Scoot brought the noos up frum the boats. Well, they wus druv clean up frum open water, blowed right off, smack! On'y the wust of it wus, they wus the Musson side o' the Crick. Most o' the feed wus there, d'ye see. Now and agin the wind 'ud clean wobble 'em up, an' blow 'em up agin one anuther; an' you could hear 'em jabber like mad; an' then a lot of 'em flapped over this 'ere side.

"There waun't no love lost 'twixt Splashey and Josher, ye knows, not in the shootin' way, though Splashey made all Josher's shoes an' boots; but if Josher could take the wind out o' Splashey's sails in shootin', he'd do it. He's told me lots o' times he wus bound to. Our guns had bin loaded, mind ye, fur geese, afore we started. Well, we wus be-

hind the wall, listenen' tu the gabble o' they geese, now an' agin pokin' our heads up tu see how near they wus gettin', when all at once we misses Josher. Splashey looks at me an' then he crawls up the side o' the wall and looks over, an' we sees Josher, crawlin' through the blite on his hands an' knees, workin' up to them 'ere geese. Splashey looks at me, fierce es a rat in a trap, an' sez he tu me, 'The six-footer shell reach 'em fust; I'm damned if she don't!'

"I sees him take somethin' out o' his pocket an' ram it down his old shooter; an' he sez, 'Not this time, Josher, you don't!' He lays his shooter on the top o' the wall, draws his long her'n's shanks up, and kneels down, takes aim at them 'ere geese, an' off she goes: an' off goes poor old Splashey! Somethin' went by my head *swish*. Up went Splashey's heels, an' then he rolled down the wall into the dyke [ditch] at the bottom. Fur the time I wus deaf an' silly-like. What in the name o' mischief hed took place I didn't know, but I goes down to him, an' then I sees as his six-footer hed busted. She'd kicked a bit middlin' hard, an' took Splashey a wipe on the head. The stock on her,

an' a bit o' the barrel, hed gone down the wall with him, t'other part on her hed gone by my head. Up cums Josher, all in a blow-like, an' Old Craft, fur he'd sloped off as well, an' there they sees him laid out with blood on his face, an' his nose swell'd up as big nearly as his paste-horn.

"Sez they tu me, 'She's wrecked him at last;' but sez I tu them, 'Let's see ef he can't be roused up.' So I breaks the ice at the edge o' the dyke with my foot, takes off my red comforter, makes a wet 'swab' on it, an' while they mucked him up I swabbed him down, like. A goodish bit on it went inside his shirt, I kin tell ye; but it did Splashey a power o' good, fur he begun tu make the most desprit faces, thin he opins his eyes, an' sez he, 'Where's them geese?'

"The long-shanked old fool hed actooally druv a bullet down his shooter, an' it hed stuck three parts down, unbeknown to him. So she busted up."

Josher Hulldown got his title in this way. He had vested interest in a certain trading barge called the Hoy. We knew her well. She brought all the commodities of civilised life, as they existed at that

time, into our village; and she carried a few things from our place to other parts. The things were not bulky; but whatever was required—a fender, a table, groceries, or liquids—the Hoy brought them.

At times Josher would be intrusted with special commissions, about which the lively young women who gave them were vastly concerned. Now the Hoy had stated times for leaving port and for entering it; but the truth was, you did well not to expect her till you saw her. To those damsels who were anxious about the Hoy's prolonged absence, Josher would hint vaguely at stormy weather, and, with a long face, would say he hoped she was safe. Taking into consideration that her avowed occupation was to navigate a tidal river, only up to London and back again, he as part-owner had not much to fear. This barge made long reaches from shore to shore.

Josher broke and sold sporting dogs—pointers, setters, and water-spaniels: he always had the best blood that could be got. To those who were in the secret, it was great fun to get near him, if you could do so without being seen, when Josher was training his dogs in the ma'shes. If a thick hedge were

between you and him, you were all right; otherwise your position was not a very safe one, especially if, in the exuberance of your joy, you made some remark that Josher did not consider complimentary.

His clothing, when not out with his dogs, did not differ in the least from that of the poorest fisherman in the village; but when out with his dogs, Josher was a transformed being, in a drab cord shooting-jacket with capacious pockets, knee-breeches to match, and with leggings called by his admirers spattle-dashers. The whole get-up was crowned by a drain-pipe hat. Superb the boys all thought it, and only equalled by his language to the dogs. One well-remembered morning, Old Craft, one of our party of shooters, had business in the ma'shes, as indeed every soul in the place had at times. He told afterwards how from the thick hedge where he had gone to look for *something*, he heard what he at first thought was a drill-sergeant with a lot of raw recruits, talking very high and mighty. On looking through the hedge, behold Josher and his dogs. "To ho—oo—o! Dash—h—h! Nellie. Down! Cha—arge, cha—arge! Most zasperous you be

goin' on! Stead—y! May Old Harry lay hold o' the pair o' ye! Now then, Nellie, down then, cha—arge!" All this time, he was, as Old Craft expressed it, waving his arms about like a merry-andrew on a stage.

"Josher," cried out Old Craft, "do ye call yourself a Christian man, trying to talk French to poor dumb creatures thet can't noways onderstand it? Ye ought to be 'shamed o' yourself."

Going up to Old Craft with an expression of supreme pity on his face, Josher replied, "Craft, 'tain't tu be expected thet you should onderstand my speaking, seein' thet ye ain't hed no schoolin' tu speak on; but I'll ask ye one question. Ef I wus tu speak tu these 'ere dogs in the same way as I speaks tu you, how wud the critters onderstand the language o' the Quality, arter I hev sold 'em to 'em?" That question proved a "poser" for Old Craft.

I have seen it stated in the most decided manner that there are no fowl in certain localities. For those who have made this statement certainly this is the case. Is it probable that local wild-fowlers will, for a paltry pound, or a couple, if it comes to

that, show the haunts of fowl to "tinkering duffers," who would only frighten them? No one has more respect for the true sportsman than I have, but it is for the genuine article!

If under the most favourable conditions, with the most intimate knowledge of the "gripes" and gullies of the slub ooze, fowl are hard to circumvent, what must it be under foul weather? For, to the stranger, the slub looks like a level flat; but it is not one by any means, for when the tide ebbs and flows, it rushes up and down these gullies in the ooze like a mill-race. Money earned by fowling is hardly earned. If it were not for the sporting element, the difficulties would be unbearable.

There is more traffic on the tidal waters now than there used to be. Where at one time you would only see one or two sleepy barges in a day, you will now see fifty or more different craft. Steamers and steam-launches have made fowl shy, to say nothing about steam-tugs, with a heavy fleet of barges behind them, churning all up from the bottom and sides.

It is mainly owing to the danger attached to fowling that it is so fascinating. A shore-shooter

is always alone. Pairs do not shoot together. There would be endless squabbles if they did. If he is on the slub flats, and the sea-fog comes down on him, even if the shore-shooter is only a quarter of a mile out and he has his dog with him, his situation is not to be envied. He may come out of it all right, and he may not. It is impossible to tell at such times which is water and which slub. More than one fowler has driven the barrel of his long duck-gun into the ooze, and grasped the stock, when he has found the water rippling over his boots and the tide coming in, not going out. And he has all but funked over the matter, when the fog has been lifted as quickly as it fell. He has just been able to reach shore after wading in water waist-high. Others have thrown down their bunch of fowl and rushed for their lives. ' I have been in this fix myself, and know what it is like. To see the tide rush round you, filling up hollows to the size of a moderate mill-pond, in about five minutes, will make you look alive. For it is a well-known fact that any fowler caught on the flats by the tide, if he has fishing-boots on, and he is not able to get them off in time, goes down.

All this is for the love of sport, the money is a very secondary matter. Well, there is good comradeship at such times. If the cry for help is heard, rest assured it will be responded to; for they have bold brave hearts. But if it be too late, the next day, or the day after, according to the state of the wind and tide, the unlucky fowler "comes ashore," as they term it.

The gale has lasted for two days. High rough tides have rushed up the creeks and gullies from the open sea, bringing up sea-weeds and fish which have their usual habitat in deep water, far out. The fowl have been flitting now here, now there, wherever they could get grass to feed on. It has been far too rough for a boat for fowling purposes, even in the sheltered creek; and it is madness to aim at fowl from a punt or skiff when the bow is playing seesaw, now up, now down. Now, however, the gale is over. The tide will be flowing up at flight-time,—glorious news for the fowlers, of which they will certainly take advantage. I have been watching the fowl all day, and my eyes ache. The salt spindrift is still in the the air, and gathers on one's field-glasses. It must be borne in mind that the very best binoculars will

not distinguish between closely allied species over a certain distance. There is a vast difference, comparatively speaking, between a curlew and a plover, when these birds are standing up; but when the birds have squatted on the hard dry slub, heads to windward, making the best of it until feeding-time comes, it is almost impossible, unless some fortunate accident allows you to get very near, to tell the difference between them. It is hard also to distinguish between sanderlings and dunlins in their winter plumage, as they run about mixed up, even if you are very close up to them, as I have been at times. On their first arrival on our coast they are not shy, if left alone and not harried.

Wild-fowl proper,—the mallard, widgeon, pochard —the dun bird or red-headed pochard—the long-tailed duck or sea-pheasant, with the two species of teal,—constitute the fowler's ducks, as they are called; that is, the eating ducks. Almost all the waders—woodcock, snipe, and plovers excepted—are odd trifles for the bird-preserver. The loons or sprat divers, grebes, gulls, and the diving-ducks, scaups, and scoters, also find their way to him. These are fancy ducks, some of them pro-

cured at intervals few and far between. I spoke of the effect salt pricking spindrift has on the eyes. It now causes me to turn my back on it, and to get on the top of the sea-wall and march homewards. Before I have tramped a mile, I meet the fowlers coming down for the flight-shooting. Nowhere else could I see such a battery of guns, half-a-dozen of them all told, some of them muskets from the army and the navy, which the owners said "*hed* helped to leather old Boneypart." The musket party proper consisted of three. The fourth man had what he called a Spanish musket, "one thet hed bin in his fambly fur years," he said, some of his folks having brought it home when they went there for fruit and nuts. Number five had what his companions called a musketoon, well named, for the muzzle was bell-shaped, and quite as large as a small hand-bell. The sixth had one of the finest fowling-pieces I have ever seen or handled. Manton's guns were not scarce in that locality. This one, like all other good fowling-pieces, would send a bullet straight to the mark if properly handled. When the butt was on the ground, the muzzle came up to his chin, and the shooter stood five feet ten inches in his shoes.

Tradition said that he had on one particular occasion cut one of his wife's clothes-props in half, pointing the lower part of the forked portion, to serve as a gun-rest. This was for a long shot. As the subject had led on one or two occasions to some remarkably hard hitting, given and received, it was not often mentioned.

I knew the whole history of those six guns by heart, for when one or the other could get me to himself he would tell me what *she* would do. One and all of them had miraculous killing powers, "ef they could on'y get among 'em" (the fowl). This they certainly did at times. As to the very ancient "musketoon," as its owner called it, she eclipsed the lot. He would launch out about raking a lot of widgeon, at feed on the slub. I should not like to state how many times that tale has been told by him, but I always listened to it with profound respect. It was her wonderful spreading power, he said, did it. He had taken her out one day and got left in his punt, high and dry in a deep gully. There he had to wait till the tide flowed. As he lay there out of sight, some widgeon pitched to feed just in front, and well within shot. He fired and got a

dozen, for they were packed as close as they could be, and had got their heads up. The distance the slub was torn up was marvellous. But it was what he did *not* get that grieved and worried him. The sly old boy knew perfectly well that not one wounded bird could he find when he floated out of the gully; but he would persist in believing that double the quantity had been killed by that mighty spreader.

To give an instance of his affection for her. When he had a bad miss-fire at a lot of fowl, at close quarters, and got twitted over it, he would say, "She ain't jest right to-day." It was a difficult thing to listen to the recital of these wonderful qualities without smiling, and I have known punched heads result through doubting that spreading power of hers. The way in which the old shooting-machine was coddled up by her owner was curious. No child of tender years and delicate constitution could have had more care bestowed upon it.

But this is only the light side of fowling; there was a darker one. Many a sad accident has occurred in those out-of-the-world localities, of which the public has heard nothing. In spite of the greatest care, misfortunes will take place at times. A

low punt of the old-fashioned sort, at night, with the fowler stretched out flat at the bottom, his long gun just over the bows, is not easily distinguished from a lot of fowl. Fowl lift only a few inches from the water. They are in one grey mass, if in close order, and of the same tone as the punt. More than one unfortunate has been towed home, lying dead in his punt, having been accidentally shot by a fellow-fowler. The fowling-punts now in use, for those who shoot for sport only, are of different construction. Those our shore-shooters used were chiefly the flat punts, peaked fore and aft, and they were made in many instances by the men themselves.

It is from this class that moneyed fowlers get their information as to the fowl and their haunts. Our ordinary shore-shooters are employed by the latter as fowling and fishing guides. It would be a rash venture to go on a strange coast without a guide that could be trusted. Incompetent loafers are to be found, go where you will; but a little trouble and tact will lead you to what you require. Then, weather permitting, if the fowl are there, and the sportsman who is after them can shoot, all will go well.

Fowling appears to have been practised by the ancient Egyptians, judging from their sculptures and paintings. In England it has been carried on to a vast extent, from the earliest times, in the Fen counties. Nets, snares, and springes have been employed for the capture of the wild-fowl. I do not intend to enter fully into this matter, but will refer our readers to an admirable and exhaustive work on duck-decoys by that keen sportsman and naturalist Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey, author of 'The Fowler in Ireland.' Nothing could be better, so far as information on that subject goes. As regards the capture of wild-fowl by decoys and other methods, from the earliest date up to the present time, it stands unrivalled.

By the way, the fowl that supply the London market come principally from Holland, the shores of that country being very favourable to the hosts that flock there for food and shelter.

Until quite recently the capture of fowl by decoys or nets has been kept a profound secret by all those who have practised it for a living. I have known the time when, if a stranger received a friendly hint from some quarter or other that his company or

his presence in certain localities was not desirable, it would have been very unwise for him to disregard that caution. To put the matter plainly, a sluice might be turned on to flood a certain meadow that he was in the habit of passing over, or a plank-bridge pulled up and laid on one side of a deep dyke on a dark evening,—the natives in this way giving him his choice between the devil and the deep sea. This state of affairs is happily now greatly altered; but it is not yet altogether a thing of the past. Rights, or supposed rights, in fowling or fishing, have always been a very vexed question. If the general public can claim these with any show of reason, let them fight tooth and nail for them. Great quantities of rough, broken marsh-grounds have lately changed owners, and large estates have been cut up. What has been the delight of one owner may be detested by the next one. If due allowances could be made on both sides in these matters, between the general public and the owners of the land, things would work far smoother than they do.

From all I have been able to learn, however, and that from the most reliable sources, the rights as

regards fowling have been a bone of contention from the very earliest times. The monks of old had trouble over it in our fen-lands, and the matter is not quite fought out yet. Some nonsense has been written lately about the cruelty that must exist in the natures of all those who indulge in sport. In my humble opinion, to be a sportsman, in the true sense of the term, you must be a man first. The hunting instinct has been the greatest blessing to England, for with it goes the spirit of adventure.

Before I venture to speak about fowling from our fine modern punts, which carry guns with all the latest improvements, let me mention one instance out of many hundreds, showing what vast hordes of fowl have congregated close to London, comparatively speaking, for Essex cannot be said to be far from it. They are plentiful enough there yet. Folkard, in his 'Wild Fowler,' written in 1875, has stated—and I have heard the same fact scores of times before I left the marshlands on the opposite shore — that on one or two occasions within present memory the capture of pochards or dun birds has been so great that a waggon with

four horses has been required to remove them. These birds were taken as they rose from the pond by means of high nets fixed on poles. I have seen enough on the wing to fill a couple of waggons. As to the amount of fowl captured in various places and at different times on and about the Essex shores, I have information that can be relied on implicitly; but if the numbers were given, I fear some would only smile incredulously. Facts are, however, hard to refute. Men who have studied wild animals—lions, tigers, and leopards—in zoological gardens, with iron bars between the animal and themselves, have ventured to doubt the accurate statements of that prince of hunters, Sir Samuel Baker. It is high time that indoor students of zoology and ornithology kept their criticisms to themselves.

Wild-fowling is, in my humble opinion, the very cream of sport; and all the money in the world will not enable the sportsman to kill fowl unless he is the possessor of three qualities—accurate knowledge of the fowl he is after, pluck, and patience. At times the very patience of Job will be needed.

On some parts of our shores the shooters or

fowlers think they have a prescriptive right to the foreshore and the water beyond. Bullets have been fired from fowling-guns most unpleasantly near to the punt of one gentleman who is well known for his fowling exploits on the tide and tidal waters. Not only that, but they have been fired also at the fowl he has been setting to, to put them up before he could draw within range. At last this was carried on to such an extent that he took a repeating-rifle in the punt with him. As a rule there is not much to hide behind, on a bleak foreshore, unless you dig a hole, and that is not done in a moment; so his hint was taken, and he was troubled no more. The portrait of this gentleman is before me as I write. In one of his own contributions to a well-known work on sporting matters, he states that foremost and unrivalled stands the work of that father of wild-fowling, Colonel Peter Hawker, the fifth edition of which was published in 1826, failing to mention, from a modesty peculiarly his own, a grand volume by himself on wild-fowling. This he most generously presented me with in 1884. I have read it through many times from end to end, and always with increasing satis-

faction. Colonel Hawker did not pose as a naturalist, but he wrote facts. The various mechanical contrivances that he invented have, with slight modifications to suit the present time, been universally accepted. He had a most accomplished fowler and puntsman, whose name was Buckle. For a time all went well with the Colonel and Buckle. Then they began to differ, as employer and employed will at times, and Buckle left him. The poor fellow died in a workhouse a few years back, aged eighty.

A proper fowling-punt is built from the very best materials, light and strong. A single-handed punt for paddling to fowl, to carry a swivel-gun of from 80 to 112 lb. weight, together with a man of about twelve stone, may be in total length a little over 18 feet, pointed stem and stern, decked fore and aft, and flat-bottomed. A punt like this would be propelled by short paddles, worked over the sides, the fowler being flat on the bottom of the punt. In the shallows a pole, called a setting-pole, would be used, or the edge of a paddle, according to circumstances.

When the fowler has found his fowl, he works

up to them till within range, then he drops his paddles, aims, and fires. If the shot is successful, he next stops "cripples"—as wounded fowl are called — with a shoulder-gun, and collects them afterwards. The undertaking is not easy. All fowl on open water rise and fall with the motion—the pulse, so to speak—of the ocean, which on the calmest day is distinctly felt.

Sportsmen of deservedly high repute have, we know, spoken in disparaging terms about fowling on the tide with fowling-punt and swivel-gun, but these are such as have been mainly accustomed to inland fowling. A double punt, one that carries two fowlers and a heavier gun, is built on the same lines as the one above described.

And in tempestuous wintry weather, when the snow is lying deep on the ground and heaped up in wreaths upon our window-sills, and when even the most enthusiastic of sportsmen will think twice before venturing out into the biting blast, what better resource can he find than in the books devoted to his favourite pursuit? Fowling has a select and picturesque library of its own, which may well compensate for enforced confinement from the

pleasures of out-of-doors. Let me take down the books that come nearest to my hand.

The author of 'Bird-Life of the Borders,' Abel Chapman, whose book ought to be in the hands of every lover of bird-life, has left nothing to be desired by the most captious critic in that work. He states in his Preface that the illustrations, rough pen-and-ink sketches by the author, reproduced by photo-zincography, have no pretensions to scientific accuracy. They are, however, all excellent. His fine sketch of grey geese on the sand-bar, full sea—spring-tides—is the best representation of geese I have ever seen. From the Borders we may pass to Scotland's fowlers; and who that has read "Christopher in his Sporting Jacket," in the 'Recreations of Christopher North,' but would give him credit for being an inveterate fowler? In 'Christopher in his Aviary,' we all see that he was a most observant naturalist. These volumes, too, are full of healthy vigorous life. Then we have John Colquhoun, most accomplished of fowlers, as his work, 'The Moor and the Loch,' proves. Mr Charles St John also devoted himself to the wild sports of Scotland. He, too, was a keen wild-

fowler. So was William M'Gillivray, the author of 'British Birds.' Whilst in the notes to 'The Lays of the Deer Forest,' by John Sobieski and Charles Edward Stuart, are to be found very fine descriptions of wild creatures and wild scenery.

The last, but by no means the least, important work that I turn to, is that by G. Christopher Davies, who regretfully states in his Preface that his book is positively the last descriptive writing anent the Norfolk Broads. As I have said before, the Fens have been generally considered to be the great strongholds of fowl. They were this, at any rate, before draining operations were commenced. But the Broads, those vast expanses of pure and comparatively shallow waters, have, from times beyond record, been equally productive,—in proportion, perhaps, more so than those great Fens which have now been drained. One great fact must be remembered: the Broads, or fresh-water lagoons, remain in almost their primitive condition, the haunt of fowl and of fish as in former days; whereas the Fens have practically almost ceased to exist. On the first page of his delightful and most accurate work, the author places the bird-life of the swamps

before one as graphically as though he had lived all his life in the marshlands. Nothing has escaped his notice. The various aspects of the Broads in summer and winter, in bright sunshine and under heavy storms, are represented as in so many beautiful word-pictures. Wild-fowling, decoying, ordinary marsh-shooting, and fishing are all discussed in the most genial manner. Reading his descriptions is like having a big crack with some old fowling and fishing friend. The shooting of a particular otter is one of the author's most charming sketches. In fact, it is a work that all lovers of fur, fin, and feather may read with pleasure and profit. A peculiar interest is attached to this book, for it represents most faithfully and minutely nature where man has not tried his improvements. I fear that state of things will not be allowed to remain much longer.

CHAPTER X.

THE GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL.

When I see a cob or a great black-backed gull in a collection of stuffed birds, my thoughts fly to a bare expanse of sands, the monotonous level broken by the timbers of ill-fated vessels which stick up here and there; with these, the never-to-be-forgotten sight of dead men's bodies, storm-tossed and battered from their contact with wreckage that had, in our homely phrase, "come ashore." When the same sands are sleeping under the hot sun, the gulls daintily stepping along their edge, or floating light as a cork on the calm water beyond, one can hardly realise the danger of those treacherous deadly quicksands, the Goodwins, the name of which has struck terror to the heart of so many a gallant sailor.

I have seen them when a mass of foaming water boiled and hissed over them, and the cry had reached our homes that a vessel had struck; and have watched the grand sea-bird, as, beaten to leeward, it made tacks to get up again, partly succeeding, to be caught again by the wind, and blown like a sheet of paper over the beach. Even then the "cob's" courage never failed him. He would beat back, and flap along the breakers just off shore, marine vulture that he is, in search of some ghastly prey. As a child, I looked on him with awe, when he came on our dangerous coast from the open sea, and flapped to and fro over the sandhills, with their scanty vegetation—sea-holly, creeping convolvulus, and bents, diversified here and there with patches of sea-kale—and then flew into the salt flats close at hand, where, on one leg, he would rest for a while by the side of some pool that glistened among tangled patches of sea blite and samphire, far enough away from the sandhills to be out of reach of all harm, even from a long duck-gun. When the fishermen's wives caught sight of him they would grow uneasy about their husbands and sons who were away out at sea. They said the cob knew

all about the storm that was brewing, and had come into the quiet marsh to hearken as it came up over the dreary flats. Then I would creep into some old crone's dwelling, and sit listening with fear, mixed with a gruesome delight, to the stories of long-past storms and the havoc they had wrought amongst our folk. And when the narrator paused to take breath and some strong puffs at her short black pipe, I thought of my friends Scoot and Winder outside with their father's boats, and pictured them drowned and driven up ashore to their mothers' doors.

Somehow, in my boyish fancy, the idea of the cob was always associated, too, with those daring old sea-dogs, incorrigible smugglers, the heroes of our lads, one or two of whom flashed only like occasional meteors across our horizon, running ashore at our port from time to time, then vanishing and being unheard of for years. When such a visitant was in our midst, his presence was felt in every dwelling on the flats, and the social atmosphere seemed charged with an electricity that was an unmixed source of joy, to the younger members at least of the community.

It had been a beautiful day on one of the loneliest parts of our lonely foreshore. After the heat of the sun had left the pebbly beach, a slight breeze had sprung up, just strong enough to stir the sand on the hillocks, and to cover up the prints of the dotterels' feet and the traces of the lizards that had revelled in the warmth and been running about all the day long. The tide was coming in, and the gulls beat lazily to and fro, looking for what it might cast before it. Curlews were busy with their sickle-like bills, trying to get a meal before the water reached them. These, with a few dotterels that piped as they ran, were all that was to be seen in the way of bird-life.

Our community of fisher-folk was moved to the core. The wildest and most daring of the sea-rovers who hailed from our port had come back to die—he was fast nearing the last moorings. His noted grey brig, which it was said had only been seen in the most fearful weather, dashing round about the Goodwins, the Flying Dutchman of those boiling seas, would never be sighted again. "He was born when the tide was full, he will go at its ebb," they said.

When the night came, and the moon silvered the waters and lit up our sandhills, the man so much talked of was close to his port, watched only by a woman as brave as himself, one who held many a gruesome secret in her keeping. True to her past, she allowed no one to hear the last murmurs from the lips of her husband. Yet her head was bowed and her heart breaking. As the tide turned on the ebb in the grey of the morning he passed from her. The great gull brings back the scene of that morning, the sun shining in on a dead, upturned face, and a lonely, weeping woman; two or three fishermen's wives standing on the threshold of the open door, with children clinging to their skirts and looking fearfully within.

Our men used to bring home in the boats young cobs that had been taken from their breeding stations. Great, brown, speckled creatures they were, of most grave demeanour. One wing was always carefully clipped. That grave bearing was not at all confirmed by their tricks and manners, as I have found to my cost. If you attempted to stroke one he would bite most ferociously, lacerating your fingers, and then setting up a querulous cry

as though he, and not you, had been the injured party.

I believe the men brought these young birds from the north—Scotland—where our fishing-boats ran at times for fish or other produce. A certain man with a keen eye to business first introduced the birds to our folks to be turned out into their gardens, the cobs being such mighty hunters of small deer. He had tried one first himself that he had caught on a line and pinioned, and it had proved so useful that in a very short time not a snail or slug could be found in his garden, nor, said he, dared a worm so much as show itself above ground when that cob was about. Even the rats and mice that had swarmed about his pigsties vanished. One day a three-parts-grown rat was seen going down the cob's throat. After that, all the folks who had gardens wanted a young cob to put in them. In the season we boys used to look forward eagerly to the advent of the great birds when the boats returned from the northern fishing-grounds. They brought a good price in those days. Not many, however, arrived at maturity. It takes three or four years for them to do that in a state

of captivity. Like most pets, some of them became troublesome, and got into trouble, too. From hunting in the garden, they considered themselves in time its sole guardians; children, dogs, and cats were neither required nor allowed from their point of view. This idea they worked out at times by their bills, vulture-like cutting-machines, to their own satisfaction, if not to that of their victims. Accidents occurred that did not always end well for the cobs. If one of the young folks went to have a look at the last litter of pigs, for instance, and the cob slipped up behind and nipped a piece out of his bare leg, a scrub broom was apt to be used in retaliation at random about the cob's body. Or a little maid just in her teens, rejoicing in a pair of the substantial boots made by our local cobbler, might have her leg bitten just above the tops of them, which would draw on the unlucky bird such a kick from the metal toetips that he would meditate with ruffled plumage on the rough ways of the world for the rest of the day. So our cobs were short-lived generally, and had to be frequently replaced.

On the boats they took fish freely from the hands

of the fishermen; the quantity they could stow away was something marvellous. They are not particular as to the nature of their food, so long as there is enough of it; a rat or a bird, a fish or a snail, or bread and milk, will suit almost equally well. Tradition said that in the early days of our oldest inhabitants the great black-backed gull bred on some of the wild flats of the Kentish coast and in a portion of the lonely salt-marshes of Essex. I cannot speak confidently as to this, but, as I have myself observed him in these localities, I think the fact is more than probable.

The shore-shooter regards him with unfavourable eyes, for if he wounds a duck or pochard, and the fowl drops out on the water, the cob will swoop down, tear it to pieces and devour it. The rock fowlers curse him most heartily, for he devours both eggs and young. I do not know why they should grudge him some of these, for there are plenty for both him and them, and to spare. On the grouse moors he is detested more than the eagle himself. He not only eats the eggs and kills the young there, like any raven, but the sitting grouse herself is not safe from him. This is not

all; he has the credit, how far deserved I cannot say, of killing and eating the young of the fierce peregrine falcon, if the nest is left undefended when the young falcons are in their down state. From personal observation, I do not believe that he is quite capable of this. If there is a trap baited for any large, rapacious bird, and the cob is in the vicinity, he is nearly certain to get into it.

Marine vulture though he is styled, I have a great admiration for this bold bird, one of the greatest ornaments of the waters and the shores. Like all other creatures, he fills the place he was intended for to perfection—being one of the police that nature has stationed in their appointed beats all over the earth and the waters. He is a restless wanderer, for ever beating to and fro, when not asleep. I have watched him on the ocean, along the shores, and in the marshes, flapping up arms of the sea inland, and around the mighty three-deckers of past days. I have seen him also calmly flying up a tidal river with houses on both sides of it. See him where you will, he is never put out or flustered; there is no rush or hurry about him. A bird of mark, he is something to look at and to remember. They

tell me he is now rare where I first knew him. I should be sorry to know that he had left that coast for good. Yet never again may I see him as I saw him last, after a storm, tearing away at something that was tangled in the wreckage left by retiring waters on the sands — something that caused me to go quickly out of sight, both of it and the cob.

CHAPTER XI.

AUTUMN LIGHTS AND SHADES.

THE fading foliage of the various trees in our woods shows tones of maroon, crimson, orange, bright yellow, russet, and that pale-greenish grey, so hard —one might say impossible—to place rightly on canvas or to give an idea of with the pen. For, as the leaf-tissues get worn with the wear and tear of the season, they become semi-transparent, and the light shines through.

I have never seen a picture that seemed to me to do full justice to what might be called this humming-bird scale of colouring. After most careful mixing of the richest and most transparent colours for those wonderful shadows that have a bloom like that of grapes in their inmost depths, and after

finding the clearest tones with which to touch in the bright high lights crisply and lightly, so that the colours may not be worked in the least degree, it proves all to no purpose.

One look at the canvas, one more look at the woodlands, with their living glorious colours, and the palette-knife scrapes off all that has been so carefully placed on. Easel and canvas are strapped up, and the would-be painter departs, muttering something about another time.

That time is still far away: no artist, dead or living, has ever adequately represented the glow of the fall.

The trunks of the giant beeches, flashing silver-grey in the sunlight, as it falls now here and now there, are spangled from their mighty roots, for some distance up the smooth stems, with the richest golden-green moss; and the dead leaves on the ground beneath, madder-brown in tone, throw the whole up in fine relief.

There is a depth of three feet and more, in some places, of pure leaf-mould; generation after generation of dead leaves lies there. Where some great tree, after living his life, has crashed down, huge

branches from other beeches have swept over. Trees, like humanity, must have elbow-room. The sun shines in wherever the foliage is open enough. That giant limb that springs from the main trunk some thirty feet from the roots of the tree, bends downwards until the branches touch the dead leaves beneath. Then it sweeps up again in the full light of the sun, the gold, crimson, and russet tones of the foliage awaking a fancy that some splendid piece of tapestry of the richest hues has been stretched out in the woods to air it.

If the woods do not give all this variety of form and colour, you have only to turn round at the next break, and to look at the hills that rise directly above you in all their various shades of green. The colouring is very different there, but it is in perfect keeping with the glowing woodlands. You will find no jarring tone in Nature. The short velvet turf that covers the chalk is very different in hue from the junipers that stud the hillsides; holly and thorns help to vary the scale still more. The final touches are given by the white breaks of the chalk showing through, and the winding sheep-tracks that lead hither and thither over the hillsides. There

are little patches of mottled gold and crimson scattered at intervals over the barest portions of the turf. These are caused by the dying leaves of the trailing brambles. It is very quiet here; no footstep of ours can be heard on these soft, elastic, dead leaves.

So still is it that the brown owl sits motionless, asleep, close to the trunk of a Scotch fir which is near to us. One look at him through the field-glass, and we pass on. Bird-life is very scanty in these woods in late autumn; even the great green woodpecker—the yaffle—leaves his stronghold of the beeches for a season. He gives, however, proof positive that he has not quite deserted them yet, for as we slip quietly along, he catches sight of us as he is busy on the stem of a decayed beech. After scuttling round, we can hear the tick of his claws on the bark distinctly; he just pokes his crimson-patched poll round the other side, his quick eye gives one glance at the intruder, then he yells his loudest, making the woods ring with his maniacal yikes! I do not know any two birds that can make more noise when startled than the yaffle and the blackbird. You may occasionally

hear both together, then the row is terrible. It is wise, when out observing Nature, to do one's utmost to avoid alarming either of these birds, for the effect of doing so is most disastrous.

As you pass through these old beech-woods you might almost fancy you were walking down the aisles of some great cathedral. Not even a faint rustle can be heard above or below; but walking on, you chance to step on a dead branch which had been concealed by the leaves—it snaps, and what a transformation that simple act of yours has created! From some cover in the undergrowth, where his bright eyes have been watching you as you passed, out dashes the blackbird, and shriek after shriek peals forth as he flies. Misfortunes never come alone, and when the frightened yells of the yaffle—not his yikeing laugh—join issue with shrieks from the flute-player of the woods, the observer of Nature may as well "make tracks" at once; that rotten stick has proved a marplot.

The wood, which had appeared deserted, becomes instantly full of life; wood-pigeons shoot up from the tree-tops with loud claps of their wings as they dash hither and thither, crossing

and recrossing in all directions. You can see through the breaks in the trees the under-coverts of the birds' wings gleaming in the light like silver. Rabbits, to whom you had been visible, although you had not noticed one of them, start out in all directions, showing their white scuts, from the hollows between the moss-covered roots where they had been feeding. Missel-thrushes screech their loudest; as to the jays, it is a continuous squawk! squawk! squawk! The chiding and chattering of the wrens, as they hop alongside of us in the undergrowth, suggest some fairy's rattle. As to the robins, you will not go fifty yards without seeing one, perched on a spray, looking at you most intently with his large dark eyes. He has come to see if it is a fox, polecat, weasel, or hawk that has made the disturbance. Finding who the real culprit is, he is not in the least put out; for he has seen a creature like that many times before, in the shape of a woodman who fed his family, times without number, during the keen frosts of the last bitter winter when they needed it so badly. The worst sound of all is the cry of the cock-pheasant, and the drum of his wings as he trees,

alarmed by the cry of the other birds. Chuck! chuck! chuck! chuckup! Chuckup! chuck! chuck! —others take the alarm, and join in chorus with the chucking solo.

Before you have gone three hundred yards you feel sure in your own mind that you will come across a keeper; and you are not mistaken, for, as you cross one of those mighty kissing-stiles, at a place where rides or woodland paths meet, close to the stem of a tree which you have to pass, stands the guardian of the wood—a stout ash-plant in his hand, capable of fetching a man or stray dog down at one blow—with his retriever by his side, man and dog motionless. He will look hard at the field-glass in your hand, and at yourself too; and if you chance to turn round as you go on your way, you will find that he is watching you still. If you thought fit to tell him that you used that glass as a harmless observer of birds, he might appear to credit your assertion, "jest to obligate ye," as our country folks say; but in his own mind he would associate that innocent double-barrel with partridges marked down from the road, jugged for the night, or pheasants marked to roost.

That field-glass in his eyes is far more dangerous than his own double-barrel. "Any tool as will bring hares, rabbits, an' birds, a long spell off, right under yer nose, waun't made fur nothin', you may 'pend on't."

Leaving these woods and the chalk hills behind us, we cross a trout-stream after a time, and find ourselves in the fir and heather district—a distinctly different country to all appearance, yet only divided from the former by a road and a stream. In front of us the firs stretch away mile after mile. Heather, broom, wortle-shrubs, and bracken cling, climb, and hold on to any surface which their roots can penetrate.

Sandstone crops up out of the light soil in all directions. The banks and roads consist of a light sandy loam; the whole face of the hill on this side of the moor is composed of stone of the toughest and most durable description. A walk of three miles brings us to the highest ridge of these hills, and down the further side of it we look into the field lands, the hedge-sides being lined for some distance with fine oak-trees. In these the rooks are busy enough, cackling and

cawing in high glee, as they thrash the acorns down in showers, like flocks of pigeons. As the day is hot and cloudless, and not a leaf or twig is stirring, we can see all their movements to perfection, looking right down on them as we do from the higher ground. A rook will have nuts if he risks his life for them. During the last fortnight I have watched these birds strip a large walnut-tree, right in front of my painting-room window. When they had finished amongst the boughs they very deliberately searched the ground at the foot of the tree for all the nuts they had dropped. These amusing thieves, dressed in shining black, are most wideawake and sagacious birds. Filberts and cobnuts they have a weakness for, as well as walnuts; the shell of the fine nuts being thin, they can split them open with one dig of the pick-axe bill. It is only when he can get no more of these by hook or by crook that the rook condescends to visit the oak-trees. In spite of all his astute calculations, he is a little out of his reckoning at times, for pigs are turned out in the fallow field in mast-time to get their own living. Vicious, snapping, and chop-

ping old mothers come with their large families of small snorks. Little pigs are the funniest creatures in existence; as you stand watching them feed on the mast — no matter if it be acorn or beech — first one and then another will pluck up courage to come and look, until the whole of one family will be in front of you, their tails wiggling, and their small snouts twisting in all directions, whilst their little twinkling eyes observe you keenly.

Presently one will begin to frisk about, like that little pig which the Irishman could not count. The others follow suit; then they face about, and you will hear in rapid succession snork! snork! week! week! snork! and then away they will scamper helter-skelter, as if they were flying for dear life.

If you stop long enough—I make it a point never to do that now—you will hear the hazel stems crash, and savage grunts issue, as some fierce sow rushes out. She champs her jaws, and her wicked red eyes look all ways at once to see who it is that has upset her darling snorks.

We hear much about domestication of animals: it has taken ages to get them in that useful condi-

tion, but so strong are the laws of Nature that she asserts herself at the first opportunity, and the tame gets wild again. I know this to be the case as regards pigs, at any rate. I speak from experience dearly bought.

Even the farm lad who leads a family of snorks from one part of a wood or field to another finds them too much for him at times, though they are so well used to him. The poor innocent sheep, as he is called by those who do not know better, will clear the floor at times; and when a sheep runs amuck, he is nothing less than a living catapult, that, if he took you fair, would knock the life out of you. We admire the rooks at their labours, which to-day appear to be for the sole benefit of the snorks and their mothers on the ground below, and pass on.

The firs on the outside belt get larger and more ragged, and the junipers show in great clumps on the open spaces—a sure sign that we are nearing the crest of this hill. Soon we come to the great stone quarry, which has been worked so deeply that it looks like some sea-cliff. We can tramp on without taking heed where we place our feet, for

the vipers went to ground some weeks ago. I used to wonder at the way the woodmen would shake and poke about at their coats before putting them on again, after they had been lying in the heather, until I saw one of the reptiles found, coiled up asleep, in a velveteen jacket that had been folded up and laid on the ground.

We take the up and down track, over the intervening hills, in order to reach the moor. No cottages are here, with blue-grey smoke from the wood-fires on the open hearths curling up through the trees; nothing but hills, high banks, and knolls, with ragged firs on them, or birches perched on the sides gleaming out from their dark surroundings. If your foot catches in the heather you might as well be caught by a wire. Hollows abound, with their splashy bits of coarse rush-covered flats; so thick is the undergrowth that it is always cool and moist here in the hottest weather. It is a dreary part to travel over, for you will not see wild creatures about this district; many places on and about these hills are, for good reasons, avoided by them. Some birds may fly over at times, but they do not rest here. Up and down

goes the narrow path, partly covered in places by the tangle, and littered with stones,—a most trying path to follow. No sheep-bells tinkle here, no sound from farm or snugly placed cottage reaches you. Not even the distant crow of some lively rooster makes itself heard; for this is the very centre of the hollows of the hills—a district of fir-trees, furze, heath, and old thorns, growing in a mixture of stone, sand, and peat.

This growth is grey with moss. You will see no bits of wool hanging from branch or stem, to tell you that sheep graze here; you will never find any animal or bird, wild or domesticated, frequent a spot that is not beneficial to it. If domesticated animals are placed in pastures that do not suit them, they are certain to make a way out of them if it is possible for them to do so. This is now so well understood that farmers grow just what they know the stock will take to. You do not find cattle breaking bounds as they used to do in past years.

Where three or four cross roads meet, you will often find the pound which serves for different scattered hamlets; and close to the pound the finger-

post is placed, directing you which road to take in order to reach a given point—if you can only get there. No doubt the number of miles is correctly stated by these ancient guides, but I feel there cannot have been the least stint in the measurement.

Three miles up a country track, called by courtesy a road, the wheel-ruts eighteen inches and often two feet in depth, the centre only a splashy track, is trying to the temper—especially if you happen to slip in one of those ruts. The longest roads end some time. We reach the top of the last hill through the wilderness track, and then a view rewards our efforts that words give but a faint idea of. On and on the landscape of woodlands, hillsides, and valleys stretches into the dim distance. All the tones of colour that were ever spread on canvas, or dreamed of, are there before us. The light is so pure and strong on this glorious day that the shadows are luminous, and the trunks of the firs can be seen diminishing into the purple grey, clear even in the distance, like the columns in a cathedral when the sun shines, as it does shine at times, through stained-glass windows of the olden time. I could linger and gaze for hours, turning

over in my mind the why and wherefore of the discord and jangle in this life of ours. The rush and hurry, the fret and struggle for existence, so much of which is needless, and simply the outcome of human mismanagement. But we remember that Nature and her unalterable laws are just now our study; and these will act for good and ill irrespective of man, with his surmisings, his doubts, and his fears.

One thing is certain, when some of the mighty forces that are part and parcel of this same beautiful Nature act, as they do at times, disastrously, so far as man is concerned, he and all he has made are swept away, like ants off a path, by a gust of the wind.

Moralising is very apt to make you take little note of time or distance; we find we have reached the last spur that leads direct to the moor. I say *the* moor, because this is one of the most beautiful stretches of moorland that the eye of man, woman, or child can look on.

After coming down the side of the hill our feet are on soft, mossy, velvety turf, for which this spot is noted. In point of fact this is a moorland glen,

closed in almost entirely by the hills. You are in a spangled hollow, secure from all winds; not a sound, not even a chirp is to be heard. You might fancy it a scene from some fairy tale. This lovely moor is not frequented. It seems to be unknown save to a few; the destroyers of the beautiful have not been here. May they never come!

You are not able to see to the end of this natural paradise, for it extends to a long distance. Not even a drip or a trickle can be heard, yet the water is coming silently from the hill-top as it has done for centuries. Under the golden-green moss, and the dry grey hill moss, it runs through the matted roots of the fir-trees that show for miles on both sides of the moorland road, filling its hollows, even where the moorland stock have left the impress of their feet. Nature has done her own filtering here, and the work is perfect. The heather is still in full bloom in some parts; where it has been cut or eaten off, it is green, tender, and luxuriant: it is new growth in this sheltered glen. I visited this spot in the middle of last November, and at first I fancied from the distance that the patches

of fresh green were self-sown firs. The thorns, both white and black, are ancient, covered from root to topmost twig with lichen and grey moss. The trees that line the road have, as I noticed before, their roots above the surface, running in all directions.

Each fir has its own circlet of roots, covered over with mosses from the base of the trunk to the finest root-end, that shows above ground. They look like huge spider-webs spread about. The never-ceasing run of the water from above is continually carrying minute atoms of the soil into the trout-stream that rises here; for this is the source of the Tillingbourne.

On the hillside near the stream a luxuriant growth of bracken droops over. It has not been cut here, and it simply hangs, "nodding to its fall" in great masses of rich brown and orange, the tones brought up by the nearness of the dark foliage of the firs. What it must have been in the bright glad summer-time I cannot tell, but it is glorious in November, in the time of the falling leaf. In some parts, where the moor undulates, the stream forms little pools. From these moorland mirrors

it falls in miniature cascades into other pools; then it is a stream once more, and on it runs down the moor. So clear is the water that the most minute objects are reflected in these little lakes, fit for elfin folk to sail on. There is a bottom of peat to all of them, paved over with large dark-red stones from the moor.

As the path we are pursuing is above the stream and the pools, the reflection we see is perfect. Birch-trees have a great liking for banks directly over pools; there is something in the mixed soil and the surroundings that suits their growth admirably. All is double; we have the birch above, and the birch reflected in the water below. The silvery stems, the drooping branches hanging over the pool, with the fading golden foliage, that ranges from all shades of rich red gold, through the intermediate changes, to a shimmering greenish gold —all are here. A small handful of leaves have fallen on the mirrored surface, where they rest. Not a bird comes, even to drink. Excepting for the insect-life that is joyously disporting itself, all is quiet; if we did not know better we might fancy there was little life here. Yet this place teems with

it; it is hidden from us, but we should not have to look long before we found it, concealed near to, in the luxuriant woodland growth. We are reminded that there is life in the pools at least; for, as we are looking at one of them, there is a very gentle rise just enough to cause a few rings in the water, but they proceed from a good trout. All large fish rise gently, compared with small ones; a trout of two ounces will make more show in taking the fly than a two-pounder.

It is their close season, however, now, and they can dispose of themselves as they like. They will run up the rills like water-rats at play — a little circumstance that the herons profit by. These birds have been well acquainted with the quantity and quality of the trout in this particular moor-stream, and that of others round about these hills, from past records. Generations after generations of herons have, by means and ways known to their family alone, handed the knowledge down, through successive ages, that our moorland streams—and this one in particular in November — are full of trout. As we travel down the moor the stream widens; large rush-tufts, in rank luxuriance of

growth, begin to line the stream, mixed with flags and sword-grass. Alders also begin to show as the moor widens, and the vegetation is swampy in character, but it is peculiar to the district. The alders are old, and, like the thorns that we have left behind us, grey with moss and lichens. Some of them have fallen through sheer old age, others have been caught in falling by those still flourishing. The living and the dead alders are coated alike with the same grey moss. On the knolls that rise here and there above the course of the stream are clumps of firs, self-sown; fine trees, many of them, with clean stems for some distance up, then a few limbs run out, and there is a thick crown of foliage above, No moss grows on their trunks, or "stams," as they are generally called in woodland dialect.

We have passed through quite half the moor, when the hills above us, we find, are silently sending water down in great quantities; in fact, the road here is covered with the purest spring-water, and we are very cautiously wading through. It is two and three inches deep on the road, but if we stepped off for one moment we might find two or three feet of the same pure water under that golden-green

moss which looks as smooth and level as a carpet. We go through this clear but very cold water at a snail's pace, so that we may not cause the least splash, for round the next bend in the moor we expect to find one or two herons fishing. If we took the higher ground, on the side of the hill farthest from the stream, to avoid that cold water, our search would, we well know, be a fruitless one; for no bird living has keener eyes than Jack Hern. Before we do actually come to the turn we slip on one side, and skirt round and in between some old grey thorns that grow on a line of moss-covered hillocks; more than once we find ourselves about to sink through with one leg. Those only who have travelled through bogs and swamps know the peculiar gentle sinking, the final breaking of the upper crust. There is a dull sob as the leg is pulled out, and you see the hole filled with water instantly. As the ground here is higher, and my field-glass is a good one, I have from our ambush a complete view of the trout-stream and all that surrounds it. Sweeping the banks I get the alder twigs fifty yards away, covered with moss, so near, that the various tints are distinctly visible; the

fallen leaves floating on the stream show even their curled-up edges. No herons are to be seen yet; I give my glasses an extra polish, and once more look right before me, and then I see something that completely staggers me; for though the heron has been a familiar figure to me for half a century, I have never seen him as he shows himself now.

From the trunk of one of the grey alders, the very tree that my glasses rested on, what appears like a grey stump steps, or rather seems to drop down, just as a dead limb drops from a tree. It walks, and now a fine cock heron "stands confessed." He is in full plumage; his long black crest plumes would be considered splendid trophies by any falconer. I fancy there is not the least fear of my losing sight of him; yet I do, and with the glass full on him; for presently he springs up noiselessly from the opposite side of the stream, into the firs. He walked across, on a fallen limb, unseen by me, in spite of my intent watchfulness. So very gently does he glide along, and his sober yet beautiful grey-white and black suit, touched slightly with grey-green and yellow, harmonises so perfectly with his surroundings, that as he stands on one of the limbs

close to the trunk of the tree, no one would take him for a bird, unless they had seen him fly up there, or had observed him move on his perch.

There is a blue-grey light under all firs when the sun shines on them. It creeps and quivers down the warm red trunks, softly wandering, now here now there as the sunlight falls on the foliage, peeping through it in places. It is all a warm purple-grey in the shadows. So is the heron. As he stands there on one leg, though to all appearance near enough for you to stroke his feathers, he seems only a shadowy form. Never before in my life have I seen him in such perfect mimicry of plumage, so conformed to his natural surroundings, as I see him just now. He soon wakes up again, glides along the limb, and floats down, light as a single feather, to our side of the stream.

And now I have him to perfection. Who cares for wet feet when his blood runs hotly as mine does now! I can see the movement of his fish-spear of a bill, which he gently moves as he glides —for his movement is too smooth to be called walking. All at once, almost with the rapidity of thought, up goes his crest, out go his neck and

wings; with one spring he is in the stream and out again upon the bank, as quickly as he went into it. He has captured what he went in for, but what the prize is we are not able to tell, we can only see it passing down his gullet. Then he proceeds to shake himself in a most unbirdlike fashion, exactly as a dog does when he comes out of the water; the long-pointed breast and dorsal feathers fly out from each side of him, so does the water.

That the heron, like the rest of the waders, could swim if necessary, I have known for many years; but that he would plunge from the bank for his prey into water too deep for wading, I certainly did not know before. In my eagerness to observe every motion of his, hoping to be able to add to my store another fresh trait in his character, I moved slightly from the cramped position, where I had been gradually sinking through a crust of vegetation between the roots of two old thorns. That slight rustle has made him suspicious, his long neck is raised, and the bird looks exactly like a pointed, decayed grey stake. The long light stripe is wonderfully like bare decayed wood where the bark has fallen from it. Then there is a change

—that long lithe neck swiftly writhes round in all directions, and his quick eye catches the glint of light on the field-glass. It is enough: slowly he floats up, without, as it appears, the least effort on his part; and from the trees, where she has been standing all this time unseen by us, floats his mate. Golden clouds mass themselves, pile upon pile, behind an old tower in the distance: it is a glorious closing to a glorious day. The light falls for a few moments on the whole length of that lovely secluded moor, making gorgeous the tree-tops and the hill-sides; purple depths are in the valley. As the light shifts, those level treacherous mosses look like golden carpets. The light quivers, flashes, dies out, and the day is done—a cloud coming gradually over all. It is grey and misty, and, with the light, fade the herons far up in the distant sky.

CHAPTER XII.

WINTER SHIFTS.

THE wind, in long-drawn sighs, has passed over the uplands, and died away in the hollows at the foot of the hills. A long low line of cloud has hung for days in the south-west, lifting slightly from time to time, to settle again as before. This belt of clouds reaches for miles. There is a break in it now and again, caused by wind rushing up fitfully from the sea, far away beyond the hills; but it is only for a short spell, then the cloud-line is continuous again. The ponies, rough and long-maned, are moving noiselessly with unshod hoofs to certain hollows well known to themselves, where they will stand sheltered and warm as if they were stabled under the thick hollies. Rough-fleeced

sheep as well as ponies have taken the notion into their heads that white weather is coming. The sheep, also, are making tracks, but in a different direction from the ponies. Their food is the same, but their habits and their choice of shelter are very different.

Wild-fowl in companies of three and two, far apart, rush overhead, high up, to certain points and back again,—wild ducks they are, so far as we are able to determine from their flight. Where the mast lies in profusion the birds are very busy on and under the fallen leaves. Wood-pigeons, especially, are filling their crops in most business-like fashion. There is no playing about,—no rushing up to the tree-tops to spread wings and tails and to trim their feathers; all that they are bent on now is to stow away a good crop of food before the snow comes and covers it in. They will still be able to get something to eat when that happens, but it will be under difficulties, for the birds will have to plough the snow off with their broad breasts,—unless it lies too thickly for them to do this,—and to flirt it to right and left of them in white powdery puffs. A large number of wild pigeons marching along on the

feed, under these circumstances, may fairly be compared to feathered snow-ploughs. It does not take long to clear a space wherein to forage. The jays, for a wonder, flit quietly from one tree or berry-bearing bush to another, too busy to squawk unless you frighten one out of its wits by quietly coming on him from behind some clump of bushes, as he is stocking away among the fallen leaves. In such case he is seriously alarmed, and makes a tremendous noise over it. The green woodpecker is just as busy as the rest, only after a different method. Something —his instinct we say, for want of a better term wherewith to describe a bird's faculties—tells him that after the sumptuous living he has enjoyed through the spring, summer, and early part of the autumn, ants or their eggs are essentially necessary to his wellbeing, to tone things down a bit, possibly. For the yaffle is positively plump just now. To procure pupæ in a more or less advanced stage of development, he leaves this belt of silver-grey beech-woods and frequents the outskirts, where are open spaces covered with fine grass and ant-hills, well studded with gnarled old thorn-trees, both black and white thorn, covered with moss and lichens. You

will be pretty certain to find him, if you know how to look for him, scuttling round some ant-hill: no deserted one, though,—he knows better than that.

There he is! the yellow patch on the lower part of his back betrayed him as he scuttled round, and he is continually on the scuttle. Up he pokes his long stout bill and a part of his head from the side of the ant-hill that is farthest from us,—a comical bird, truly. He is listening to find out, if he can, what that suspicious rustle was that he heard just now. He is not quite satisfied, and presently he dives into the ferns at the stem of one of the old thorns, a little farther away. Being well acquainted with his antics, we look at once at the middle of the tree, and there we have him, his head twisted round the stem, looking in our direction. My glass is full on him, and he appears a most extraordinary fellow as he raises the crimson feathers of his head and lets them fall again, the head well on the slant, —a red-capped, long-nosed, feathered harlequin. On examining the ant-hill on which he has been so busy, we find he has excavated into it sideways—driven tunnels, in fact. There has been no waste of labour; he has gone straight for the emmets

and their domestic offices. Probably the insects and their eggs have, as I have already suggested, a corrective property which is fully appreciated by the yaffle, and he means to have his fill of them before the snow comes.

On the broad roads, or rides, cleared in the beech-woods, where the wind, to a certain extent, keeps the leaves from gathering thickly, large flocks of chaffinches and tits gather: from the great tit to the little blue tit, all are busy at the fallen mast. There is a continual twink! twink! twink! As to the tits, they chide and chatter; and mingled with them you will find the beautiful bramblings, or bramble finches, conspicuous at once, as they fly up, by their white tail-coverts, as well as by their scissors-grinding note. I kept a pair of these once for a time, but had to give them their liberty or they would have ground us out of the house. One thing is very noticeable about all birds that have luxuriated on beech-mast for a long spell,—their plumage gets the gloss of satin on it, doubtless owing to the great amount of oil in the nuts. A woodland friend brought me a couple once for preserving: they were skinned with the greatest diffi-

culty. In fact, the bird-preserver told me that if I had not been a special friend of his, he would have thrown up the job. The man who brought the bramblings informed me "they bramblings hed bin a middlin' good thing for him, fur a *real gentleman* as he knowed on took all he could ketch: he said they wus as good as some birds as he'd eat in furrin parts. I made bold," said he, "to ask what they birds might ha' been, an' he told me they wus *ortlins*. Queer names they has fur critters in furrin parts."

Missel-thrushes, song-thrushes, and blackbirds flock to the yew-trees for their luscious berries; so do other birds, but the thrush family contrive to keep a monopoly of the yews. We have been taught by some theologians that "birds in their little nests agree": they certainly do not do so when feeding. I have been standing hidden in the middle of a bush close to some yew-trees, and have witnessed a scene of scolding, wrangling, and some battles-royal, not to be surpassed in human life. The scarlet-vermilion berries are in profusion on the trees, and they cover the ground below in spots over which a more than usually energetic struggle has been taking place.

Where the boughs have had most light and warmth there is, of course, more fruit, and the largest and ripest, and the birds feed there voraciously. The perfection of bird-diet they find it. On one heavily berried branch three missel-thrushes settle: one fine fellow screams defiance at the other two, who will not see the matter in the same light. So a conflict ensues: at it they go, feathers flying and floating away in all directions. It ends in the fine bully having the bough all to himself, but minus quite half the berries, which have been threshed off in the scuffle. He does not long enjoy his position unmolested, for as he raises his head to take a look round before feeding, showing a beautiful spotted breast, a couple of robins, the fighters of the woodlands, make a dash at him, knocking him off his spray of yew. And so the game goes on from morn till eve,—screechings, cluckings, chirpings, and flutterings amongst those yew-trees.

The squirrel also appreciates the berries highly. I have just seen one of the prettiest sights possible, —a squirrel feeding on them in most dainty fashion. The pulp is of a sweet glutinous nature—very sticky, in fact. To see the way the little fellow glided over

the thick dark foliage until he found a branch just to his liking was a treat. Then he sat up, his fine brush-tail well up to the back of his head, ear-tufts erect, and those bright eyes glancing in all directions to make sure that all was right, before he indulged in this luxury. Very neatly he picks off a fine berry with his forehands,—in spite of the information one of our critics solemnly volunteers us that squirrels do not possess hands, I cannot bring myself to call them feet,—places the fruit in his mouth, eating the pulp and dropping the seed. Just as he is reaching out for another berry, two song-thrushes dash down on to his branch. He gives one look of amazement at the intruders, then makes a dash at them. This they by no means appreciate, for they know that if they once get into the clutch of the squirrel it will go hard with them. He belongs to the gnawers; but, like the rest of that family, or at any rate most of them, he indulges at times in other diet than a strictly vegetable one.

These sights are most interesting, but the inside of a bush is not quite so comfortable as the outside of it. I burst out suddenly. Master Squirrel chatters and is off. All I see of him is his tail. As

to the birds, there is a flutter like that about a pigeon-cot, so great is the number that fly from those old yew-trees.

Snow is certainly about; one or two small flakes have been seen; now some larger ones fall. We shall not be long without more, for the flakes cease falling just as suddenly as they began. The air is too cold yet for it to come down. As the daylight begins to get low, lurid streaks show, low down beneath the long line of cloud-belt. There is a murky light above that gets darker in tone, for the belt is moving and appears to rise. The winds moan as though heavily laden, and complaining about all they had to carry and drive before them. Beside the hedgerows the blackbirds are busy, tossing the leaves from side to side, peering under hollow places for snails or worms. Instead of their usual shriek of alarm they give only a half-smothered cry as they slip through the hedge, to get away from you. The hedge-sparrow, that beautiful singer when other songsters are still, glides in and out of the hedge, flirts and shuffles with his wings, justifying one of our local names for him, that of "shuffle-wing." He is silent now,

however, for he knows that he, with others, will have to hunt hard and to little purpose before long.

"Chack-chack!" muttered out overhead, tells us that fieldfares are near. There they go, a flock of them, to roost on the ground in the "forey" grass, like larks. A few redwings detach themselves from the company, and with feeble clucks make for some plashy hollows that are wooded and well sheltered, there to find food with the woodcocks that frequent the same locality.

"Peewit, weet, weet—peewit!" Here come the green plovers from the large open fields of the upland farms. They wheel and flap, and twist and wheel again. We think that they have decided at last to go, but we are mistaken. They make once more for the fields they had left, settle, run about, and then rise, calling most mournfully, as they pass over us, a flapping company of black-and-white, making for the sheltered coombe, close to the old farm where they have had their haunts and homes "from beyon' recknin'."

The wind sinks as we reach the foot of the upland; flakes of snow come on us: more fall, and

we hurry on, for a blinding storm of snow at night, in a rough, wooded district, is a serious matter, fearfully misleading even to those who know the country well. Rooks are sagacious birds — they have the faculty of self-preservation very fully developed; but I have known them all at sea in a snowstorm, and completely helpless in one of the thick white fogs that are so very prevalent in the woodlands, after a heavy fall, and a half-turn of the wind to the southward for a few hours. In such case they will drop in the first trees they come to, or even on to the tops of hedges, flapping, fluttering, croaking, and quarking in a most unearthly manner, unable to reach their rookery until the fog lifts. Their instinct, or reckoning faculties, fail them, just as man's will fail him under similar circumstances.

The leadings of instinct are by no means so unerring as some would have us believe. I have known a kingfisher come to his death by plunging down on to the roof of a low greenhouse, mistaking the glitter of the glass through the shrubs for water. Insects are continually fluttering against the top-lights from inside, especially butterflies,

and birds will attempt their capture from without. Wild creatures often make fatal mistakes, and catastrophes occur at times that exterminate hosts of animals and birds together. After heavy snows the remains of unfortunate creatures—such as do not of their own accord associate together—have been found involved in one common ruin.

Before we reached home the snow had fallen so thickly that the footsteps of those who passed were noiseless. On the morning following we find the ground covered a foot deep in some places. Travelling over it in one of my usual rambles, I find that the birds are not affected by it. That is because there is no frost. Snow may lie for weeks, if it does not freeze, without wild creatures being punished through it. The robin, as we pass him, looks at us with his bold dark eyes, warbling a cheery song, as if he thought the wintry weather most seasonable and enjoyable. There was never a snowstorm yet that completely covered all places: go where you will, countless spots of possible shelter will catch your eye in every direction. The snow may be lying on the hedges, where it has drifted in such heavy masses as to bend them over

to leeward, but the banks below will be free from it. And as nearly all hedges have water-runs on one side of them or the other, the ground is soft, and so everything that lives in the banks can be got at by the birds that live on snails, slugs, worms, and the many various forms of insect-life in a torpid state, mature or immature. The berry-eating species keep more to the tops of the hedges. These are in the best of spirits, for their food gleams out in the midst of the snow in the most tempting fashion. Crimson hips and the berries of the hawthorn are in profusion. Fieldfares have gathered here, chacking and chattering, as they cling with their strong feet to the heavily laden twigs: the snow flies off all round and about them. The bullfinches that are feeding on the privet-berries look like roses as you catch sight of their brilliant breasts, while they cling and flutter and pipe within a few yards of you. Wild fruit is in the pink of condition when the cold weather sets in: it becomes sweet and smooth, instead of being acrid and rough as it was.

If by some rare chance any of the clustered berries of the mountain-ash are left, they will be fiercely fought for. The ring-ousel, the blackbird of the

moors, will be sure to have his share of them if he be in the district. So partial is he to this fruit, that I have known him stay his flight and come close to houses near Dorking town, where some of the mountain-ash trees have been grown as ornamental objects on either side of the entrance-gates. This was very late in the season. That ring-ousels are about during the winter months I have had most convincing proof, having seen some that had been shot by men when out blackbird-shooting.

It is the frost that punishes and kills our wild creatures—unless they are extremely hard to kill—not the snow, which protects and keeps them warm. The hare that sits in her form of dry tussocky grass and dead ferns, roofed over with stout trailing brambles, which the weight of snow actually makes to touch the ground just in front, is snug and warm. Her food is close within reach, and, so far, she has nothing to fear from the weather. It is very enjoyable walking across large unfrequented woodland fields after a good fall of snow, providing there is a public right-of-way through. There is no silence that I know which is so impressive as the silence of

a snow-covered country. A dim light is all round about, no stars are visible, you can hear yourself breathe. So far from being cold, one feels uncomfortably warm. A very slight shift in the wind would cause it to thaw a little, but that shift does not come.

Spots appear in the fields — spots that move. They are hares and rabbits feeding. They will soon clear the snow off their nibbling-ground with their fore-feet. Just now they are playing high-jinks,— the rabbits are cutting fine capers. Soft white weather does not upset their arrangements, so far as food is concerned. We can see something coming towards us, making for the hares and rabbits right across our path. It ploughs along at a rapid pace: we crouch low to bring our sight on the snow, and know at the first glance that it is that dreaded foe of rabbits, the stoat. I have seen him on the hunt in the snow before. He rushes along, leaving a furrow behind him, where he has parted it in his progress. Now he is close to, passing us sideways. He catches sight of me, and bounds from out the snow most actively, but in the direction of his prey. If he gets near enough to them without being seen

or winded, there will be short but very deadly work for either hare or rabbit.

A change comes; the winds get up in the north, then shift to the north-east, whence they blow as nor'-easters will blow, whirling the snow off large fields, to deposit it in huge drifts in the roads, blocking them up. At night the winds sink again, and it is clear and dry; the stars twinkle merrily, and a hard frost sets in. Next morning a hard blue sky is overhead, the wind is keen and bitter, it still freezes hard. Notice the robin now as you pass along. His cheery song is over, and he weeps and mourns so that it is positively disheartening to listen to him. One of the things I cannot bear is to hear the robin cry.

Fieldfares, redwings, and lapwings flit restlessly about, at a loss what to do. Had the snow remained on the fields with the root-crops left for sheep-feed, it would have been all right, for the birds would have found good shelter under the broad leaves as well as food. But now the ground is hard, and their food is under it. So they move to and fro, loath to quit what had been their happy hunting-grounds, until some of them, the thrush portion,

get so weak that they are unable to extricate themselves from the hedges into which they fluttered out of your way as you tramped past.

The plovers make for the lowlands, where they wait for better times. Starlings betake themselves to any uncovered grounds they can find near the edge of tidal rivers, excepting a few that remain and come with the sparrows to feed near our doors. Keats's beautiful lines come into one's mind, suggesting so much in so few words:—

> "St Agnes' Eve—ah, bitter chill it was!
> The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold.
> The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass;
> And silent was the flock in woolly fold."

Here we have hard bitter weather in four lines of poetry; and I could fancy Keats kept an owl at some time or other as a pet, and that he perfectly understood how the bird's plumage is disposed on its body. The manner of this is somewhat remarkable—in long stripes, as it were. I have seen my own favourite owl stand in front of me, and throw his breast-feathers on each side of him just as a waistcoat is thrown open and aside. The plumage is very loose on all parts of his body, so that

if it were blown upon, the owl would, as Keats has said, "for all his feathers be a-cold."

And then the limping hare, and the silence of the sheep. So much is given here in small compass. Hard black frosts—frosts without moisture—if continuing for any length of time, take the voices and the life from all wild things. Little by little their food-supplies grow smaller; besides which, other creatures, driven from their accustomed haunts, come to share what little support there is.

After a time the wind changes suddenly dead south, and heavy rain falls instead of snow. Bare spots show in the meadows; the blessed sight of green grass is visible once more. Birds, poor things, show their joy and thankfulness by soft chatterings, chirpings, and whistling. Rooks, wagtails, and larks must be in dire straits when they come to feed in the streets of a populous town, as they have done. Now they are in the fields, hunting by the half-thawed rills and in the meadow splashes for anything eatable, either living or dead. The change does not last long, however. As I come home, about four o'clock in the afternoon, a significant sight attracts my attention. A small herd of

Bewick's swans — the small wild swan — six in number, pass overhead, low down over the woodlands. My glass has been on them from the time the rush! rush! rush! of their strong wings gave notice of their approach, and it follows them until they are lost in the distance. They came from the south, and at full migrating speed are making for the north-east. On the darkest night you can tell if a swan or swans are passing overhead, if low enough to be heard. No other bird that I am acquainted with in England gives out that strong measured rush! rush! rush! that the swans do, whether wild or domesticated. Our own tame swan, the most graceful bird of the whole family, exists in a wild state in Russia, Poland, Italy, Persia, Siberia, and elsewhere, in exactly the same condition as he does domesticated here. Many of our tame swans visit the tide when frozen out from their inland waters, either of their own accord or decoyed away by the trumpet-calls of wild swans —the mighty whooper or elk swan, the Polish swan, or the small Bewick swan—passing overhead.

Our tame swans reach the tide, the open sea. So far good: they see other fowl feeding on the

succulent sea-grass,—feed and fly with them, just as they would with the geese and ducks on some of their own inland mill-ponds. Now not one shore-shooter in twenty carries a field-glass, and though his local knowledge is in the main accurate, yet he is often a little hazy where swans are concerned. "It's a swan; but if that bird was not a wild bird it would not be there on salt water," said one man I knew. "Get the punt out; I am going behind the sea-wall to fire off my charge of duck-shot,—it's too cold to draw it." Presently, as the punt crept up, some fowl rose and flew close by the swan, which began to make preparations for following them. His wings flapped on the water. "Keep her steady when I fire," says the shooter. The report rings over the water, and the swan floats dead on it, the bullet having passed through his body, just below the joints of the wings. "This one is different from the one I shot last week," remarked the man to his companion, when the bird was pulled on board; "the other was larger, and it had not got a nob on its bill like this one; it is like what our common swans have." It was, in point of fact, just a domesticated swan that had

visited the tide, whilst the first he had shot was a real wild whooper.

To return to the herd of Bewick swans I saw pass over, there is nothing uncommon in sea-birds flying over woodland districts; and they will frequently settle to rest there, if an open bit of water catches their keen eyes. The force of circumstances sometimes compels them to take routes that they would scrupulously avoid if they had any choice in the matter. The razor-bill auk, to my own knowledge, has been picked up in a ploughed field thirty miles from salt water, where he was sitting up like a rabbit in one of the furrows, no doubt lost in wonder as to where he had got to. Close to the woods this was. One of the plough-boys went to see what curious creature was there. The auk returned his look freely. Then the boy made a grab at the razor-bill, which by no means belied its name, for it bit its would-be captor, not once but twice, severely. For this the poor auk got such a kick from the toe of a very heavy boot as killed him.

I had remarked to my wife that the sight of swans moving was not reassuring; and the next morning my fears were justified, the country being ice-bound,

and the roads like glass. Many of the birds that had been feeding in the damp meadows lay dead beneath the trees in which they had roosted for the night, frozen to death. There was a week of this, and then a partial thaw came, followed by snow. A desperate time it was for all wild things. I saw the weasel hunt the long-tailed wood-mouse, coloured like himself fawn and white, and nearly as large as himself, from the snow-covered brambles to not a yard from my feet. That was a fine opportunity for observing the tactics of the hunter and the hunted. The mouse flattened itself out like a bit of light leather: not even a particle of snow was disturbed from the bramble-stems over which he crawled to get beneath the loose flints. On one side of the low trailing branches was the mouse; on the other the weasel, ferociously searching for his prey. He did not get the mouse—the small creature baffled him. Had it been a rabbit, he would have had it most certainly. Mice are not frightened when hunted by the weasel as rabbits are.

Strange news of creatures being about that have not been seen for years has been brought to me

this season. Farmyards, hen-roosts, duck-ponds, and sheepfolds have been visited by "something" that has left curious footprints in the snow, in coming and going, resembling a long hand with a dent like that of a long nail in front of it. These were the marks of the badger; but so much did this strange track disturb one old dame who keeps a large quantity of poultry in a lonely district, that she talked to those who passed by about the Witch of Endor and "Satan walking the airth agin." It was in vain to try to explain the matter to her, telling how the badger, being unusually hard pressed, had come to her fowl-house, had tried to get in all round, and, finding himself foiled, had prospected in a general way all round the farmyard. I pointed out to her where his belly had touched the snow, making a smooth trail; and again where he had ploughed it up with his snout like a pig; then farther on I showed her his tracks to the cover under the hill,—but all to no purpose. The old dame refused both comfort and explanation. "Massy, oh alive!" she cried; "things like thet 'ere waun't about when I wus a gal, an' I wishes they waun't now—thet I do."

Of the depredations committed by the fox under sore stress we shall say little; yet they have been beyond all credit, save by the sufferers from his audacious plundering. It says much for the sporting sympathies innate in the true Briton that, in spite of the heavy losses foxes and their families have entailed on the farmer, it has only been in certain instances, where it has become a direct necessity, that one or two have been killed: they have been allowed to plunder as a rule. Extraordinary devices have been employed, however, in secluded woodland districts, to keep foxes away from poultry-farms, by day and by night. Not one case of fox-poisoning have I heard of: when it was necessary to kill one, it was done openly, and by those who had the right to do it.

I know of some pheasant-aviaries that are not far away from fox-earths, where there are rare pheasants from the mountains of India and China,—the gorgeous monals and the curious horned pheasants. These are far too costly to serve as food for the fox; but if he does not get into the aviary he rushes round and round, in his cat-like fashion, and frightens the birds horribly. The golden

pheasants cry and dash in their swift flight, more like scarlet macaws gone mad than pheasants. A most exasperating sight it is for their owner to see bruised and broken tail-feathers on the ground,—magnificent ones, too, four and five feet in length, from the tail of Reeves's pheasant—the birds looking like a lot of frightened scarecrows, compared with their wonted brave appearance, one or two in a dead or dying state from battering themselves against the wire-netting. The aviaries are necessarily large, both long and broad and high, so as to give room for the magnificent plumes. I have seen one of these glorious birds dashing itself with a thud against the bars of its perches, frightened by a sneaking fox in the day-time. At night it will be far worse.

This villanous conduct on the part of the fox is forced on him by the shifts to which he is reduced. Rabbits are supposed to be a legitimate food for him; but as they fetch in this neighbourhood, in the heart of the country, from sixteen to eighteen pence without their skins, foxes are not able to get all that they require at times. One must look at things from many sides. I have seen wild crea-

tures in smooth and in hard times, but it has only been after spring has come in, and we have found their bleached skeletons in all kinds of places where they had crawled to die, that we can fully realise how desperate their winter shifts have been.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FAMILY OF WADERS.

BEAUTIFUL, happy creatures are the waders. They know nothing of distance as we estimate it, for their wonderful wings, which speak so plainly of the wisdom and foresight of their Creator, carry them at a marvellous rate of speed round and across the whole world. To them four or five hundred miles is only a pleasant flitting. No gale stops them, knowing well, as they do, how to take every advantage of all air-currents, through which their strong wings cut as if they were knives. Our shores and the wide edges of our tidal rivers would be desolate indeed without their enlivening presence. In summer and winter, in fair weather or foul, the waders come, and in countless hosts they

rush up and down the coast-lines according as the weather compels them. They do not come to grief in the same way as the sea-ducks and divers that I have seen washed ashore, beaten or blown to death by wind or water. I have never known this to be the fate of any members of the family we are now considering.

As a rule, they are good birds for eating; in fact, many of them are considered delicacies, and so, as a natural consequence, they receive the very best attention from the fowlers. If one of my readers should happen at any time to pick up a dead wader, he would find, on carefully examining the bird, a shot-mark or some other trace of accidents to which such birds are subject. The very impetuosity of their flight is at times the cause of their death; for when travelling at top speed, low down, as they frequently do, just to clear the shingle or the sand-dunes, if they come in contact with a thistle-stem or a dried tangle of sea-holly, it is enough to kill them. One of the finest female sparrow-hawks I have ever seen lost her life through a trivial shock received when at full speed; for the strongest birds have about them that subtile vital principle so little

understood by us, an injury to which results surely in death, and that an instantaneous one. I have examined many a bird that has been killed by shock, but have never been able to find any injury sufficient to account for this. They have all been in good condition and fine plumage, not one feather out of place, nor a single drop of blood oozing from the mouth; yet for all that, one and all were killed by what to me has appeared a most trifling accident.

In hard weather—that is, in real hard times—the larger members of the family are somewhat hard set, but the small waders manage to pull through. The case must be desperate, indeed, if these get in poor condition; for their food-supply consists of the smallest creatures: these their wonderful nimbleness and activity enable them to capture as they follow the ebbing tide or trip along the edge of fresh-water rivers, lakes, and streams. Their attractive forms always fascinated me as a boy, so did their wonderful legs and feet. Most admirable and perfect studies they will be to the end of my life, showing how admirably every creature is fitted with the exactly suitable means of

gaining a living, and of living happily. In all weathers and in all kinds of places have I watched their comings and their goings, their swift flights and their restless trippings, now here, now there; and they are to-day as fresh and fair to me as in the days of my childhood. Still I would again remind my readers and my critics that I never attempt to write from a scientific point of view, but only aim at describing clearly what I have plainly seen.

The tide has gone down, leaving the salt-marsh a steaming ague-breeding flat. There is a shallow run of water in the wide creek, the navigable channel. Into this hundreds of rills and gripes trickle, the drainage of the ooze. So level is the coast-line here that it takes a long time for the water to run off the flats. The harvest is nearly over, but the weather still keeps hot and dry. A real sweltering marsh harvest, our old folks call it. So hot is it that the whole region has fairly steamed all through the day. And now the sun has gone down just low enough to throw a peculiar rosy golden hue over all that its light rests on. A rich light this is, one that is only seen in the fen and

marshland districts—one of the compensations, of which every form of life is full. It turns all the reed-stems into fairy golden pillars, or purple ones crowned with beautiful plumes. And the foul ooze is transformed before one's eyes, becoming a vast purple carpet, having the daintiest touches of rose colour, whilst the rills that drain it show like threads of gold. Under this light the noisome marsh, the breeding-place of fever and ague, has the same deadly beauty with which some poisonous snakes are endowed. Here, under the grip of the fell disease, I have lain 'twixt life and death, praying in the daytime for night to come, and when night was there, longing for the morning.

But what is poison to some creatures is life to others. These spots suit that long fish-spearing heron to perfection. Eels, crabs, flounders, and a host of other small deer take refuge in the rills when the tide goes down. Whilst you are looking, one or two grey shadows move over the slub, then suddenly stop; and you wonder what throws those shadows, as no living creatures can you see. The mystery is soon solved, however, for from one of the rills a streak of light shoots up with startling

rapidity. Then follows a waving of broad wings, also most extraordinary movements, as of some creature possessed. It is a heron that has speared a fair-sized eel—one, in fact, a size too large for him. The fish objects to being swallowed whole, as only eels can and do object; that is the cause of the bird's capers. With raised crest, and the feathers of his breast pluffed out, he goes for the fish that is squirming and wriggling about on the mud, digs at him, picks him up, tries to swallow him; but without success, for the eel will not have it. Then, changing his tactics, the heron picks him up once more and thrashes the mud with the fish right and left. This has apparently a beneficial effect, for he soon joints the eel up and eats him. So closely at times, as I have observed before, under certain aspects of light, does the heron's plumage fall in with his surroundings, that if he would let you, he could be walked up to without being seen. Before leaving him, I would remind my readers that it is never wise to take any heron up, to look at him, before you are quite sure that he is dead. These birds take a lot of killing, and when one seems really gone, even then you will

do well to keep his dagger of a bill and his long neck away from your face. So-called dead herons have been known to revive with very disagreeable results.

That noble bird the curlew comes next on our list. His plumage, mottled, speckled, and cut up with broken tones of brown, grey, white, and light-*red*, makes him look like a plover when squatted, unless his long sickle-shaped bill can be detected, —a most difficult matter when in that position. He is wary in the extreme—morning, noon, and night on the alert. That he is brought to bag at times is certainly no fault of his, but is mainly due to his surroundings.

"There's a flood-tide to-day, Master John," said one of the farm hands of an old friend of mine, whose extensive fields ran clean down to the salt-flats facing the Essex shore. "It strikes me that if you brings your old double, and Don, you'll stan' a rare good chance fur a clip at curlews in the swede-fields. I've sin two mobs on 'em pitch in at half-flood time. You gits here, 'twill be full flood, the ma'shlands will be flooded right up to the field-grounds. They curlews is bound to come an' pick

about in the swedes. They're whole curlews, not jacks."

"All right," said John; "I'll be here and see what can be done with them."

Two hours later, John and I were in the farm-yard talking to Ned. "They're in the swedes, a lot on 'em," he told us, "a reg'lar mob, an' no mistake. They pitched about the middle o' the field."

Our plan was soon formed. I very quietly slipped round the old, thick, black-thorn hedge at the far end of the field, directly opposite to the point where my friend would enter it.

Then John set to work. One wave of the hand to Don, his old Spanish pointer, was sufficient. Through the hedge we could see him drawing cautiously on and on; for the dog winded them very quickly. He stops for a moment, draws on again, and then stands like a statue; a full point, and no mistake about it. Very quietly his master nears him, and for a few moments man and dog are alike motionless. Presently, what from our hiding-place looks like a cloud of wings blots out both. Then two reports ring out and two birds

fall, a capital right and left, a kind of performance John is rather noted for. As he comes back with the birds, their fine wings flick and brush the turnip-leaves at each step he takes. This slightly puzzles Don, for they are very different from the partridges, to which he has been more accustomed. Ned — or, as he is usually called, Neddy — has bolted across the road from the farm, with a broad grin on his face, to meet his master, congratulate him on his luck, and pat old Don.

"You've got 'em, Master John; I said that you'd clip 'em."

"Yes, they are clipped right enough, Neddy," replies John; "and you can have the pair for the missis and youngsters," adding, when we were out of sight and hearing, "*They* will get through the job right enough; but, so far as I'm concerned, I decline curlews that have fed on the ooze for any time."

And yet no bird is more eagerly sought after than the curlew, for the bird's bump of self-preservation is so largely developed that it is considered a feather in a shooter's cap to take the rise out of one neatly. All coast lads are born with fowling

and fishing instincts. No matter how young they may be, they are on the paddle for fish or on the look-out for fowl. These two subjects, when I formed one of the community, were all folks had to talk about. No wonder the boys entered fully into them. When we little fellows bathed or paddled, it was—if big lads from thirteen to fifteen were not with us—usually in one of the gullies that ran from the creek, up the saltings to the sluices in the sea-wall. Directly the tide turned, some of us would be sure to slip down and peep round the mouth to see if fowl were feeding. On one well-remembered afternoon a lad that was with us whose age was fourteen, which circumstance caused him to be looked up to by the younger fry, together with the fact that he had killed a gull with his father's duck-gun, came wading up from the mouth of the gully and quietly told us that he should just like to see some one on the wall with a gun. As he craned his neck to look up, to his great delight a shooter did appear there. Crawling out as quietly as a dyke-eel, the lad beckoned to the gunner. Then he slipped into the water again, about three feet deep in the middle of the gully. Cautiously the

gunner crawled through the blite, and looked down at us lads, whispering, "What is it?"

"Curlew," whispered back the sage of fourteen; "they're feeding round the mouth of the gully on the ooze. Lend us yer gun, I ken knock 'em over. I knows I ken do it."

"But she'll kick and bruise ye terrible."

"Oh no, she wun't; fur I shell put my weskit on an' stuff my worsted stockin's in front, an' button up tight. If she do kick, she wun't hurt me."

As the waistcoat was of the then very fashionable material called nankeen, the boy, after completing these arrangements, did certainly look a very odd figure. The gunner, besides giving him careful directions, told him he looked like a toad with the dropsy. All this was of course spoken in the most subdued tones, for fear the curlew should "shank" or "flight" it. Then we boys proudly watched our companion cautiously wade down the gully, his gun well away and in front of him. Presently a bend hid him from our sight, and we waited with eyes and ears open for the shot. With a roar off she went, and we tore down the mud and water of the gully like so many mad bull-frogs, the shooter

running on the edge through the blite. When we reached him, there sat "Billy" in the ooze, completely smothered in it, his "weskit" unbuttoned, and the worsted stockings hanging over his knees in the most comical manner. The gun he held upright, "To keep her out o' mischief," he said.

"She ain't hurt, I ain't hurt; she did kick, thet's how my weskit got loose. I'd 'a had him all right if it waun't fur that cuss'd yelper of a redshank, as made him git up afore I wus ready-like. Them yelpers is the wust birds livin'."

The curlew is a most interesting bird, see him where you may, on some upland with the sheep, in the grass-meadows, or on the shore, when huge dark storm-clouds roll in from open water, a gale blowing, and the white parts of his plumage showing like large snow-flakes as he and his companions are driven shrieking and wailing in all directions; or in the calm, still days of early autumn. As I lazily drifted down the swale in a fishing-smack I have watched him probing for lug-worms, running nimbly or walking sedately on the mingled sand and ooze. When the birds are feeding you can get a good view of them on either side, if you conceal yourself in

the nets. So close to them have I been that my glass has not been needed. This was in past years, when that part of the swale was seldom visited; for the grass grew rank in the main streets of our old fishing borough, that lay as though sleeping, wrapped in a shimmering haze of the autumn.

The whimbrel, half curlew, or, as he is more frequently called, jack-curlew, is very like his larger relative in his habits and food, and quite as wary I have found him to be. There is about the same difference in size between them as there is between the full snipe and the jack-snipe, hence the name of jack-curlew.

Curlews allow themselves to be blown or drifted only when waiting over some favourite feeding-ground, before the tide has left sufficiently for them to feed. I have watched mobs of them, repeatedly, waiting for the tide, when a heavy gale has been blowing. The birds know that their food is just below them, so they merely flap to and fro, and put up with the inconvenience of being blown about. At any other time they would shoot clean through, in the teeth of the gale. Only those who have seen a frightened curlew go up or down a creek lined with

shore-shooters, shrieking as he flies, can form any idea of the bird's swiftness. I have known a bird of this kind 'fly the gauntlet' for three miles, and there has been bang! bang! bang! from every shooter that he passed, good shots too. He escaped the lot without being touched. Swift fliers at all times, their ordinary speed is as nothing compared with what it is when they are frightened.

The oyster-catcher, sea-pie, or sea-magpie, paddles on the hards, the sands, and the ooze. Where mussels, cockles, and other small shell-fish abound, there you will find the sea-magpie. The name of oyster-catcher is not well applied to this bird. I have carefully examined the bill. It is certainly well fitted for picking and wedging open small shell-fish, but the oysters have nothing to fear from him. Any one who has opened them knows that some considerable force is necessary for that operation. There is another circumstance to be taken into consideration. Oyster-grounds or beds are mostly rigidly protected both by day and night. No game-preserves are more closely looked after. If the bird was in any way injurious to these, the owners of the beds would at once take measures for

its extermination, at least on the oyster-beds. This, on the coast that I am writing of, would have been a very easy matter, for they were not numerous there. Some of my own relatives, since gone down to old Davy's locker, owned at one time the largest native oyster-beds in the district. Through them we were well acquainted with the oyster's foes, but the so-called oyster-catcher was not one of them. The bird is very handsome, the black parts of his plumage showing blue, purple, and dark bronze-green reflections, the tones all brought into vivid contrast by the pure white of the rest. The orange of the bill and his purple-red legs complete his brilliant colouring.

The waders get their living in the slub ooze, in the reeking, rotten swamp, about the marshes and the foul marsh-drains; yet their plumage is pure and glossy, not one speck or stain will you find on the bill, feathers, or feet. A lot of waders feeding on the slub at dusk are easily moved forwards by those who know how to do it, in the direction of a long fine net which is stretched on stakes; but they must be moved, not frightened. If alarmed, they fly low and dash at full speed into the meshes

and hang there. Now, although they may have been feeding on such quaking bog-land that a stone the size of your fist would bury itself therein of its own weight, no dirt-stains will you find on the meshed birds.

That curious wader, the avocet or cobler's awl duck, as he was called, from the shape of his bill, was not considered rare in my own time. This we believe he now is; for the greater part of the spots he frequented have been drained. Godwits, or red-breasted snipes, as they were called by our shooters, were considered, in our immediate neighbourhood, as out of the common. Romney Marsh flighters, they were styled, a name very much to the point, for at that time Romney Marsh was their abiding-place.

Then we have the redshank, pool-snipe, teuke or took, sandcock, red-leg, red-legged horseman; all these names are given to him, as well as another, which exactly expresses the main characteristic of the bird, the cussed yelper; and he certainly does yelp. If wild-fowl possess the virtue of gratitude, they must quack, bark, whistle, shriek, and grunt untold blessings on the redshank's head, for the

yelper is their feathered sentinel. Whether he acts the part exclusively for their benefit, or for himself alone, the fact remains, he rouses them all thoroughly. This I have proved to my cost many a time.

When the tide is up, all is level on the flats; even the blite is covered until the tide goes down. To all appearance the blite is left dry; but this is not the case, for thousands of small pools are left at the roots of the blite shrubs. These cannot be seen, because the thick grey-green leaves cover them. Most of the fowl feed in the numerous gullies that run through this salt vegetation. Some of the smaller kinds feed in the pools under it. If any web-footed fowl are about, they are sure to pitch in one or other of the gripes and gullies.

One morning early I was out with a trusty fowling companion, when, from our hiding-place behind the sea-wall, we saw some widgeon pitch in a gripe, followed by a couple of curlews. The gripes, as a rule, were about two feet in depth, and completely overhung by the blite, so they were concealed from us and we from them. My companion looked

at me and whispered, "How far is it for a crawl?"

"About fifty yards, I think," was the whispered answer, through the blite. No more was said. On hands and knees we went at it, a dirty, evil-smelling crawl, through that wet, slimy, salt, sodden tangle. We were like a couple of tortoises. Just as we were about to rise for a shot, up started a redshank, yelping at a fearful rate. There was not the least chance of a shot, for he simply threw himself out of the blite-pools into a gully close to the gripe. We did not rise, we simply looked at each other and said nothing. No words could express our feelings as we saw him shoot out of the gully, perch himself on a tussock out of shot-range, and bob up and down like a large thistle-bloom all the time. It was too much, and we at once decided that he must die. We would blow him to atoms and make thistle-down of him to punish him for his misdeeds. That was our intention, one we were determined to carry out; but the yelper had views of his own on the matter, and he was equally determined that we should not kill him. The ugly chase he led us was enough to disgust even an alligator.

He knew where all the yelpers lived, and they answered him. They flew together, and yelped together. They also disturbed all the fowl for miles, and sent them to open water. We did not get a shot that day, and, what was far worse, we did not get that redshank. Yet I like the bird. He has been associated with our shore and swamp wanderings for so many years; he is the fitting ornament to the place he frequents; and his wild cries fall in well with the howling winds and the lap of the waves on those bleak shores. Wild, noisy, and suspicious, he is far above any other wader, according to my own experience; but, like other wild creatures, he reverses the order of things at certain seasons. Quite recently—that is, three years ago—and we have every reason to think that it is the same now,—several pairs of redshanks were building and hatching in some rough ground close to a Government dockyard—in fact, close to a populous town only one hour's journey by rail from London Bridge.

With the dunlin or ox-bird will close this short account of some of the waders that live principally on the edge of salt water. It is only such as can be

seen almost daily that we have described. The forms that frequent fresh waters we shall mention presently. It is simply under stress of weather that some families visit the tide. A large cloud of dunlins is one of the most interesting sights that a naturalist can look on. They are such pretty, innocent-looking birds, no matter where you see them, on the wing or tripping along over the slub.

One little memory of them comes up before me. We are looking down a reach of the creek, a mile or more in length. The tide is out. There are the mud-banks on either side, the channel in the middle; and above and around, as far as the eye can reach, snow, nothing but deep, frozen snow. A dreary look-out it is, and it makes one feel melancholy; for the wind rushes up the creek and cuts like a knife. In the distance something is coming up with it that looks like the smoke from the funnel of a steamer; it waves and streams as smoke will do in a rush of wind. Now the smoke has vanished. Again it shows thick as at first, and then it breaks up in patches. Presently the dark cloud becomes a light one, a great flash of silver.

It consists of dunlins coming up with the wind at full speed. We can hear the rush of the thousands of wings, and their soft chatter some time before they reach us. Now they are here: with a humming roar they pass below us up the creek, shoot up, showing black and white as they turn, dive down into the creek again, pass us, and take a sweep over the snow, where they are invisible, for their white underplumage, caused by the turn, is in the light. Another turn, and a dark cloud is passing over the snow and into the creek. One turn more and we see that cloud of dunlins drop below us on the slub—a vast host of living silver dots moving rapidly over the dark-brown mud and grey ooze. As they throw their wings up, as they flirt up from one spot to another, all busy chattering and dibbing, now here, now there,—for we can see all their actions, so close are they to us,—I thought that it was one of the most interesting sights I had been privileged to witness.

No one could be in the company of shore-shooters one half-hour before hearing ox-birds—dunlins—spoken of. There are some out-of-the-world spots, once well known to me, which are unchanged to the

present time, 1892. They have remained just the same as I left them forty years ago—ooze-quags, where a man is smothered in less than a minute, if he gets into one and no help is near; quick-sands, and rotten swamps abound. Ague and fever are there too, as of old, also clouds of dunlins and other fowl, for those who know these spots.

Bitterns or French herns — herons — were frequently met with. This was nothing to be surprised at, when the fact of their nesting one time in a vast swamp on the opposite shore is taken into consideration. The inhabitants of those drowned districts were, from the peculiar run of the land and water, completely isolated. Hundreds of rare birds, at least they would have been thought such elsewhere, shared the fate of commoner ones. They were eaten, or, if they were not fit to eat, thrown away after being shown to the general community as curiosities in fowl. The bittern is the bird of desolation. It is in desolate places you will find him, if he is about at all. All his habits are secretive ones. As a rule, he comes out with the marsh-owls. His plumage mimics the swamp-tangle perfectly, and the bittern draws

himself up by the side of that tangle, his dangerous bill pointing upwards in a line with the great rush-stems, so that you might be within a yard of him and yet not see him. Frequently it has been the case that shooters have had these birds clutter up close to their feet. The postures that the bittern and his dwarf relative will put themselves in to avoid detection, is simply marvellous; for the little bittern was found in the same locality, one that is little known even now. So well were these strange postures understood, especially when the birds were wounded — that is, wing-tipped— that the shooters called them "jipeses." As this very peculiar marsh-word, "jipe," was always applied by them to anything monkey-like, the term was a very suitable one. Both birds, the great bittern and the little bittern, can climb like cats, the little bittern being an adept at it. Yes, birds that are thought rare now were common enough at that time; but the three R's, reading, writing, and arithmetic, in their most simple forms, were uncommon in those days. As to the science of ornithology, the very mention of the word would have ostracised you as a "furriner." Still, as I have said before, they

knew all the fowl and their habits most thoroughly well. As a boy I became proficient in two things. I could read fluently, and patiently study the birds from morning to night. Also I tried to draw them. This last accomplishment, I can assure my readers, was at times a source of disheartening trouble to me, both as regarded my comfort with the home-folks, and my disappointment when I could not do it to my own satisfaction. They were loyal to the very backbone, those dwellers in the marsh-lands and along the shores. "For God and the King" and "for Queen and Country" have been promptly responded to when the call has been made, by my own people especially. Men and women, married and single, all were quickly up in arms for their country and their sovereign,—a hot-blooded, hard-handed people, but their hearts in the right place. How often memory recalls that wiry, long-legged, kind-hearted friend, that prince of bog-clearers, dead long ago, Baulk, who was a man in the full sense of the word! With his musket slung at his back, like that of old Hulldown, "one thet had bin fet with, in the wars with the Frenchers," and his long ash leaping-pole, he was the admira-

tion of my younger days, and a naturalist to the tips of his fingers. Where we have been together, others have given us a widish berth. No matter, in the water or out of it, round the swamp or stuck fast in it, anywhere would I have gone with Baulk.

He knew where the French "her'ns" were to be found when they came on the marshes. One day he told me that he "wus goin' fur a 'jipes'"; but he would not allow me to go with him, for he said, "'Tis too shaky a place fur you, boy; I shell on'y jest be able tu git in an' out of it. I shell see ye to-night 'bout six." Between six and seven he made his appearance, plastered over with swamp-mud and water, a Barnaby Rudge kind of figure, with the bittern slung at his side. His hands were covered with blood, as if he had been trying to keep some wild cat away from her kittens. To a host of questions, all poured out at once, he replied that he had "threshed him out o' the Dead Man's Lantern ma'sh, poked him out with his pole, out o' a great clump o' flags an' brush-willers. Then he had shot at him, an' winged him. When he went to pick him up, the bird had turned over on his back an' spread-eagled himself, with his legs an'

claws drawed up like a ma'sh-hawk, a reg'lar jipes o' a thing he looked." Very cautiously had he tried to get hold of the bird's legs, for he well knew the fighting capabilities of the bittern, but the "her'n" was too quick. He grappled Baulk like a cat, the claws of both feet going to work, and the bill as well. If he had got his bittern, he had also got something to remember.

Some places Baulk had permission to visit, those that belonged to my own friends, who grazed on the marshes; but leave or no leave, nothing stopped him. He and his musket, with the help of his trusty leaping-pole, swung all over the district with a rapidity that was amazing. One grazier, a fresh comer, on seeing him on his marsh, told his looker to catch him. The man could hardly believe his ears. When the full sense of the order broke on him, he simply looked at his employer, and slowly said, "Ketch him! ketch him! why—it's Baulk!" There was a lot of dry humour about the man which found vent at times among his acquaintances. "Joyful" Price, the little baker, was one of these. "Joyful" was a nickname given to the man because he was continually on the

grunt about something. "He reckined he'd got the ager comin', he must get sum ager med'cin'." This Baulk supplied him with, direct from the marshes. The little man made good bread and kept a lot of fine rabbits. Now there was not a lad in the place but what had heard of Ostend, or, as they called it, Oast-end, for some of the larger vessels were constantly trading there, backwards and forwards. One or two of the captains hailing from our port had brought their sons home some enormous rabbits from Ostend, not the kind that comes from there now. These fine creatures were the admiration and envy of all who kept rabbits. "Joyful" saw them, and so he grunted worse than before. To such an extent did he grunt and inquire after "ager med'cin'," that Baulk at last told him he thought he could get him a beauty somehow. About a fortnight later, as the baker was in his little back sitting-room, smoking his pipe and sipping his "med'cin'," in walked our friend Baulk with a good-sized hamper, and with the words, "I've brought him, I can't stop now," he departed in haste. Closing the door of his little room, the baker cut the string that

kept the hamper-lid down, put the lid back gleefully, and looked at his coveted treasure. There sat a great rough-coated marsh-hare looking hard at "Joyful"; but only for a moment, for with one loud cry of "Aunt!" he was out and about, a very whirlwind of a hare! It seemed to "Joyful" he saw hares in all directions, so rapid were the creature's bounds. Flying to the window, he opened the casement. Out went the hare down the long garden path, and from thence into the marshes, leaving "Joyful" in a condition not to be described.

Those who have never been on the flats of tidal rivers at night and early morning, for the purpose of listening to bird voices, would be astonished at the perfect Babel of cries, all going on at the same time. I mean in such places as where the Thames and Medway meet the tide. The fowl call when on flight, and keep up a conversation with each other when feeding. No wonder the superstition about hell-hounds exists even now. Many of the folks believe that spirits are rushing through the air, wailing because the hounds are in fierce pursuit of them. The flats themselves must pass away

before their wild traditions are lost. But when geese, widgeon, pochards, ducks, curlews, oyster-catchers, redshanks, dunlins, plovers, snipes, herons, and gulls are barking, quacking, whistling, wailing, and cutting the air with their strong pinions, the concert is what might well be called an uncanny one.

Plovers, the green or lapwing plovers, unless driven by stress of hard weather, confine themselves to marshy districts, and the fringes of the flooded lands; and when they are compelled to visit the tide, they leave it again the first opportunity that offers. Golden plovers are far more frequent on tidal flats; when they are seen there, it is, as a rule, in considerable numbers. The heavy plovers —"heavy as lead" is the gunner's term for them —the grey plovers, keep to the tide. This is the species of which individual members are so frequently mistaken for very fine specimens of the golden plover. The mistake is an excusable one, for the two species, in their winter plumage, to an ordinary observer are very much alike.

In my wanderings I have met with the green sandpiper, and this beautiful bird at once claims

attention. When I have seen one I have made the best use of my eyes, for he comes and goes like a flash. Five minutes sums up the longest time that ever I have had the pleasure of observing him at one time, for the bird seems literally to fall from somewhere. When you are in the least expecting or looking for him, there he is before you, and the next moment the bird and his whistle are gone. This restless spirit of activity is not confined to time or place. The green sandpiper is the Wandering Jew of his species, for ever moving on. I have seen him on the very tops of the hills, with nothing near him but myself, and I kept well hidden in the tangle. Again I have known him stop close to where a dozen men were moving gravel, just long enough to wonder at the stranger near to them, and then he flashed off. Only once have I seen him, just where one would expect to find him. So far as my experience goes, with the slight opportunities I have had of examining him living, he is the most erratic in his movements of all his family. Most birds, no matter how shy, can be got at by crawling, hiding, and with the aid of good glasses; but the three combined will not secure you a good

sight of the green sandpiper. He is for ever moving on. Something impels him to constant haste. In two places I have most unexpectedly met him, the first time it was on a breezy upland common, with just enough wind blowing to carry the white clouds along without blowing them to pieces; a few sheep were wandering about, their bells tinkling. On one side of the common are a number of old blackthorns, with wisps of wool sticking on their rough stems, then comes the long highroad, and close to the road is a small pond, gravel-edged, where the cattle that graze on the common come to drink. A shrill whistle, and in front of us is a beautiful bird. He runs a short distance, his feet just in the water, picks at something, whistles, and is off over some old beech-trees. I have examined him dead, and have seen him and his mate exquisitely set up by a naturalist and bird-stuffer, but you must see him alive to form any idea of the dashing vitality of the bird itself.

Another sight of this, to me rare bird, I recall. I have left Surrey Hills behind me to wander in another county, in the forest districts of Hampshire for a time. It is wild there, very wild and beautiful.

You are continually coming on spots of fairy-like beauty in hollows among the heather-covered hills, away from everything and everybody. Coming home to my resting-place in one of the hollows, I found a small lake, with a margin of the whitest glistening sand all round it, then came green turf, heather-sprinkled, and a belt of old firs surrounded this. All above the hollow was purple with heather-bloom. As I make it a rule never to approach any place openly when I am on the look-out for wild creatures, I cautiously peered about. It was a charming picture, the old firs mirrored in the water, the belt of sand round it, and the whole lit up by the soft light of early evening. Nothing was to be seen or heard from any living thing, and the very stillness seemed to add to its beauty. Suddenly from over the tops of the firs the peculiar whistle sounded. A flash of black and white shot over the water, and there stood the sandpiper on the sandy margin, for a little time, a few minutes only The bird ran quickly here and there, and then he shot up and went over the firs in the same direction that he had come from. When in the hand the upper part of the plumage is greenish brown, speckled

and mottled, the lower part white, so that when flying, he looks like a black-and-white bird.

The common sandpiper, summer snipe, or fiddler, as the country-people call him, because he is continually moving up and down, can be generally seen in the proper season by those who know where to look for him; for the bird frequents trout-streams, the rills that run through water-meadows, and the margins of ponds; in fact, any place that will keep a minnow or stickleback in good health suits the merry little fiddler. He runs and flits in all directions, now and again sounding his cheerful pipe. This species you can watch for any reasonable time, if you do not alarm the elegant little fellow. He likes a nice strip of sand on the edge of a gudgeon-stream, fringed by old pollard-willows, which when the sun is shining brightly, throw innumerable pointed shadows in the pure sand, if the wind moves their leaves ever so lightly. A spot like this, only one out of the many to be found, is the place to see the little wader to the very best advantage, for one of the old willow-trunks will easily conceal you. If you choose, you can get inside of one of them, so decayed are they. There he

is, running on the margin, now for a moment he perches on one of the willow-boughs that hang over the water, the next he is minutely inspecting the moss-covered top of one of the stones that rise just above the surface of the rippling stream. But no matter where the bird may be, he is never quiet, always flirting, dibbing, bobbing, as restless after a fashion as the green sandpiper. There is, however, this great difference, the fiddler has not received that imperative migrating order to move on that his larger, and, as far as plumage goes, more handsome relative seems to obey. This sandpiper breeds with us. The young, covered with down, grey on the back, with a dark-brown stripe and white underneath, are the prettiest and most innocent little fellows that can be imagined, nimble also to a degree. The birds swim and dive well too, when there is any necessity for it; they are sprightly creatures, that by their incessant activity give life at times to places which, without them, would be lonesome.

With that brown and grey impersonation of bird-craft, that swimmer, diver, runner, and climber, the water-rail, my chapter on the waders, a brief

one from necessity, will close. I possessed a couple of water-rails recently. Any one who has examined the structure of a water-rail would cease to wonder at the marvellous travelling powers of the bird. It is formed expressly for the purpose of gliding through tangled swamp vegetation. The bird is very courageous; in fact, the thin, drawn-out creature is decidedly of a pugnacious disposition when he thinks fit. I have seen him on the war-path once, and once only. Then he certainly feared nothing. This was in the breeding season. I have heard him groan, grunt, and squeak in a fashion peculiarly his own, when I have been in the thick reed-beds; have heard also the heavy slush-up of a pike, and for a moment the flick and flutter of wings. What that boded one could only guess at, for it was impossible to see. One thing I know, and that is, when the feathered inhabitants of the swamps have their young, large pike work themselves right up in the thick of the reed-roots and stems, and there they remain, from motives of their own.

From the nature of the localities these birds, the waders, frequent, it is very difficult to know much

about them. Conjecture as to facts is worse than useless, it is mischievous. Whatever I have stated in these pages about the birds is from personal observation. It is not much, certainly, but what little there is, is all from the life.

The admirable groups of British birds with their natural surroundings, left by the late eminent naturalist, E. T. Booth, to the corporation of Brighton, are all that could be desired or wished for. In the Natural History Museum at South Kensington we have, too, the series of groups composed of British birds, set up in the same manner as those contained in the Booth collection at Brighton. To all those who may be interested in birds, without having the time or opportunity of searching for them in their own habitats, either of the places we have mentioned would give all they could wish to see, the life of the creatures alone excepted. The rising generation — those, we mean, who admire bird-life — can form no opinion of the difficulties field naturalists had to struggle with under forty-five years ago, whereas now princely and lifelike collections are open for study and instruction free.

Those who seek for wild creatures in their haunts,

must be out in all seasons and in all weathers. Some of my most valued insights as to the ways and haunts of wild-fowl—notably swimmers and waders—have been gained in such rough freezing weather that for very pity's sake,—for a merciful man must be considerate to dogs,—the rough-coated water-spaniels have been left at home. If the bird aimed at came to hand, well and good; if it did not, the great gulls, the black-cobs, ate it almost alive.

CHAPTER XIV.

THROUGH FIRS AND HEATHER.

WINTER has not left us for good and all, but there is a change, that something so hard to explain in mere words, that I may call life in the air. For many years I have greeted and watched the first signs of this fresh life, and their effect on our wild creatures and their haunts. I have already written about the Surrey Hills, at least of a great part of them. Holmbury, and as far as Hindhead, my readers have explored with me. Beyond this region there is a wilder country, a vast hollow flat, that lies between and at the back of the hills, which is the borderland of three counties, Surrey, Sussex, and Hampshire. A land of stunted firs and stunted heather it is, and of silver sand and bogs,—a barren, hungry district,

where man and his dwellings are remarkably scarce, and when found they yield nothing to cause you much joy. A fresh face is a novelty there, and the speech is strange. A short, courteous question, however direct to the point it may be, finds no ready answer. Often I have been nearly out of sight and hearing before a reply has been shouted at me, and then it was to little purpose. Now and again there are exceptions to be met with, but they are few and far between. The foresters are good fellows, when you know them and they know you; but a stranger, whether well or roughly dressed, is regarded with suspicion. Before the native can make up his mind as to what brought you into the wilds, what you want there, and what you are going to do now you are there, you will probably be out of sight and hearing, leaving him something to ponder on for a week at least. But for all that, be sure he has looked you well over, and he would be able to give a most accurate account of your dress and features, of the stout ash staff you carry in particular; and it will be matter of conversation with him for months to come.

My time is my own just now, there is nothing to trouble about beyond clearing these cotton-grass bogs before the gloaming comes; and I feel confident that we shall strike on a main road leading to a village or hamlet somewhere. The buds on the trees in the distance, where they cover the hills—no leaves are out yet—give a tone of purple grey which is in fine contrast to the green turf on the hills. We have left nearly all the oaks and beeches behind us. Now and again one shows, but only as a straggler here and there, where a patch of soil is suitable for their growth. Although we have entered the hollows of the hills, mile after mile of broken ground extends in all directions. Huge hillocks, conical in shape and well wooded from base to crown, stand up and out from the heather, or, as they term it here, the "heth." Away in the distance two huge mounds face each other, with a vast gap between them. This is the "Devil's Jump," and the hollow between the mighty mounds or hills is the "Devil's Punch-bowl." Some very strange traditions linger about the hills and hollows yet, and they will do for centuries unless some extraordinary circumstances

alter the character of the country and the country people.

The fields we have passed have been very large, those at least which are under cultivation. It must have taken centuries to have prepared them to yield corn as they do now; for adjoining them, with only a fence to keep cattle off them, is bog-land, full of running water, about two feet below the level of the corn-lands. The difference in the soil must have been taken advantage of in the earliest times for the growth of corn, to judge from the old records. This district must also have been under monastic sway at one time, for the pilgrims to Canterbury travelled over these hills and through the hollows. I have known many instances where bogs have been drained and converted into corn-fields; but when ground is left as it always has been from the first, depend upon it there is a reason, and that a good one, for not trying to cultivate it. The draining of the fens has from the time when the monks held sway there proved costly work, and it is not completed yet, having ruined many in past times. It will be for coming generations to see the end

of it; either to see them all corn-lands, or, if the seasons change, as they have been changing of late, the fen country may once more be drowned lands.

One circumstance we may note as we walk along, all the cottages, the old ones, dotted here and there half a mile or a mile away from the main roads or paths leading to them, appear to have been built just where a strip of land cropped up that could be cultivated. Evidently the country-folks had hunted for the ground to suit them, and then built a house upon it. All around these homesteads was too poor to grow a thistle. No doubt a geologist could account for the few and widely scattered patches of spade-tickling ground existing in a waste of shining silver sand and dwarf-stunted heather. One thing is very certain, the soil was not carried there.

There are some new cottages dotted here and there on the edge of the forest-road, which looks itself as if it had been newly made. Many of these are empty, and those that are occupied do not look at all cheerful. Two enterprising individuals, with that reckless courage which leads men on to conquer or to die, had opened shops some time ago.

One was a butcher's shop, the other a baker's. They had since closed them, for reasons best known to themselves.

It may have been in this wild land that some political wanderer, seeking rest and health after arduous parliamentary duties, first conceived the idea of giving the tiller of the soil and the foresters three acres and a cow. There are acres here, quite enough and to spare, for all the inhabitants; but the land would not keep cows, even if whole herds were distributed. There is something pathetic in the look of those two new shops, with their blinds down, torn, and mildewed. To all appearance no one had ventured to repeat the experiment. The rustic population will go to shops in their own immediate neighbourhood, or to a general shop, where you can get anything from birch-brooms to pickles, only when they are obliged to do so. The town tradesmen take the greater portion of the country money, because the people firmly believe that they can get better value for their money where articles are sold in large quantities, on the principle of moderate profits and quick returns. The country is well solicited for custom in all

directions now. Wherever it is possible for any light cart on two wheels to travel, even if the wheels sink into the bog up to the boxes on its way there, you may be very sure that smart cart, with the firm's name on it in gold letters—they are all firms and companies now—will manage to come. They have good horses of stout build in the shafts, animals with blood in them, for many of their owners use them for hunting. One of these horses I knew, when going his rounds, heard the hounds in full cry. That was enough; he was off, light cart and all, before the man in it could get hold of his mouth. It was rough from the start; but when the cob charged a low sand-bank that bordered on a fir-wood, then came the climax. The cob rose at the bank like a deer. He not only cleared it, but he cleared himself from the harness as well, and shot clean out of it like a rocket, leaving the cart behind with the driver in it, or rather out of it. He was not hurt, for he jumped on his legs and used language which would by some be considered profane. The cob was brought back in the evening, with small portions of harness decorating him here and there; and, to judge from

the brightness of his eyes and his frisky demeanour, he appeared to have enjoyed this hunting on his own account immensely. Now, when one of these gaily decorated carts draws up at a lonely cottage to deliver a list of goods with prices attached, and the man in charge tells the folks they will have good value for their money if they honour him with their custom, the master or the "missus" believes "there must be a summut in it, and reckins as they wun't go to that 'ere little pokin' shop down in willage no moore." Besides this, they flock now to the towns on Saturday nights from all quarters. Six or eight miles are considered as nothing in view of all the advantages set forth in the list of goods and prices. The master says, "It's a bit o' a change like fur mother an' the gals." The girls, fresh-coloured, healthy lasses that they are, certainly enjoy it thoroughly. "To be waited on as if they wus ladies, an' showed heaps o' things to pick an' choose from, an' talked to nice by real gentlemen as waited on 'em, and thanked 'em for their money, an' bowed to 'em when they left the shop—that's the place for their money when they has any to lay out, an' no mistake about it."

The next time they have occasion to go the village emporium for some small article, where the shopman and general-utility man serves behind the counter, his hair shining with pomatum, such as is used on country shop-assistants' hair only, "the gals" manage to convey the impression to him before they leave the establishment that he is a fraud, not the genuine article at all, and quite unworthy of their notice after the gentleman that waited on them in the town. After a visit of the kind you may notice that when the country dealer takes off his coat, leaves the counter, and goes into the yard to wash the cart before going his rounds with it, he does it in a vicious manner. Country lasses they may be, but they are true women, and they possess the peculiar faculty that has descended to their sex from the first, that of bringing the so-called sterner one to book, if they think it necessary, in a pretty sharp manner. Let me at once confess that I am a married man, and up to the present time, as all my friends — none too many, by the way — can affirm, I have gone well in double harness.

I trust my readers will pardon me for this long

digression. We have mentioned the huge mounds that jut out like buttresses from the hillsides. There is one near to the cottage where I stay. On reaching the base of it from the moor road, we find a gate in the thicket that is at the bottom, which leads to what looks like a bridle-path running through the stunted firs and birches. Slender-stemmed oaks are scattered about, but they are not numerous. The soil here consists of sand of various tones of colouring, from buff to silver, with dark peat-mould in some places. This has apparently been washed down from the top of the mound, for small rills are running from the top to the bottom in all directions. So slight is the covering of leaf-mould in some places, that we lift the mosses and stunted heath clean off the loamy gravel mixed with sand, just like lifting a carpet off a floor, and lay it down again. Delightful, indeed, it is, wandering about here; for paths, or rather tracks, run in all directions, up and down and round the hill or mound. The glass shows us hollows sparkling with the first shoots of bog-vegetation, overhung by slender birches, which are perched here, as we afterwards find they are throughout the whole district,

on sandy knolls. Go where you will, if there are sandy bits jutting out, you will see birches of various sizes on them. Decayed and decaying stumps of trees are dotted about in the hollows in all directions. Beautiful objects, these; for the decaying wood is rich red-brown in colour, beaded over with a film of moisture, and spangled with the vivid green vegetation, that flourishes only in such localities as the one we are trying to describe. A track runs by the side of one of the rills. This we follow upwards, to find that we are looking at a lot of tiny cascades, caused by large stones in the loamy gravel. There will be a trickling run for a few feet, and then a stone crops up. The water shoots over this in a tinkling splash, a fairy fall, which has in the course of time hollowed out a small pool below the stone, containing it may be a gallon, or two gallons, of pure spring-water. In some of the hollows on both sides of these water-runs is dark leaf-mould, the accumulation of decayed leaves that have fallen from one season to another from—who can say how long? Green mosses, tiny ferns that the winter has not cut down, with quantities of various twig-brush, cover the banks of these runs. Presently we

stop and look intently, for on the leaf-mould edge we see some holes bored, some being smaller than others. Other signs also there are, which tell us these rills are the dining-places of woodcock and snipe. As to the water-courses at the bottom into which these rills empty themselves, they are full of trout. About the trout I have a few words to say, or rather about their travelling habits, and this concerns all the trout family. The small ones, about the size of sprats, leave the main water-courses and shoot up these small hillside runs. They are in clover there, unless some creature, furred or feathered, goes for them; for they shoot into the first small pool—the descent is very gradual—dart out of that up the run a few feet, and in some parts only a few inches, into the next hole; have a rest, and off they go again. In this manner they will work half-way up the hillsides. It is actually startling at times, when turning over a pool in the runs with your stick, in order to find how deep the mould at the bottom is, to see a small strip of gold and silver flash up out of it with a leap, wriggle down the run into the next hole, and spring from thence again, to proceed as before,

showing you plainly that he can go down quicker than he got up. They have many enemies to contend against, these small spring-jacks of trout. The brown owl is one of them, the crow another; and when the heron drops off one of the trees, where he has been standing unseen, floats down to the bottom of the runs, and then proceeds to walk up them in the most deliberate manner, fishing hole after hole as he works upwards, there will be, the next day, plenty of room for fresh comers. They are very handsome little fish, but they do not grow larger. Bird-life here is not abundant. We have as yet only seen one hawk, a male sparrow-hawk, two wood-pigeons, and a few jays. Our glass tells us that just below, in a dry, sheltered, sandy hollow, there are some signs of animal-life, for a great heap of sand has been freshly turned over. We find this out presently, for as we turn westwards the light in the sky tells us the sun has got low down. This decides us to make for the top at once, to see where we are, for we have lost all trace of the way by which we got here. On reaching the summit, we find that by simply walking off the top, so to speak, of this hill or mound, you are at once on the high-

lands of Surrey; and if you followed the tops or crests of the hills, no matter on which side of the bog-hollows or valleys, you would come to other huge projecting mounds, the mighty buttresses of the hills. They are all named, but it is not necessary to give their names here, as my description is not intended for a topographical one. Here, as in other out-of-the-world places, they give his Satanic Majesty the credit for most of what is wild or grand in nature, as well as very much that is exceedingly beautiful. Legends, wild and strange, have been handed down from generation to generation. They remain now as firmly rooted as they have ever been. The two great powers of good and evil still carry on strong warfare within those who live under the shadows of these hills; the blood of the wild nomads who first settled in the vast hollow was hot and intemperate. One might fancy their ancestors had drunk pretty deeply of the devil's own brew, and that its effects are still visible in the features as well as in the habits of the present race.

We are on the borders of what was the home, a few years ago, of the wild red-deer. How many stags and hinds have been killed in this district,

without leave being asked of any man, it would be impossible to say. The quantity of spirits too, and of other small matters, free from all duty, provided in some mysterious manner to wash the venison down, on the principle that good eating requires good drinking, is also only known to those who live here. If it is possible to get at woodland records, faithfully told by word of mouth, you can rely on their truth implicitly. The difficult thing is for you to get these. Folks generally have a few official records concerning the deer and other things, and those who killed them; but if that which is only known to their descendants could be told, it would make a stirring record. Knowing this to be a locality where you will get on only by strictly minding your own business and keeping your mouth shut, I look and listen intently, but say little beyond "yes" and "no." Looking round now with my glasses, I spy two woodmen at work at the bottom and make my way quickly down to them. "Can I get out on the road if I skirt the bottom of the hill?" I ask.

"Yes," one replies, "you ken git there, but 'tis soft."

Its softness meant tufts of tussock-grass over a quaking bog. This I do not feel drawn towards, so I come back, telling my informant that it is too soft for me at any rate, and as my smile evidently propitiates him, he tells me to take a path, not often used except by the foresters, which will bring me into the road quickly.

"By that heap of fresh turned sand?" I ask.

"Yes, right by there. That's where I hucked a badger out a short time back."

In about twenty minutes I am once more on the main track or forest-road, evidently at the back of the spot where I turned in to explore the mound. After walking up a track between low firs, I see some one coming towards me, and getting near the figure, it proves to be a grizzled old man, with a large bundle of "heth" on his shoulders. Through this he has driven a pointed birch pole or stake, both hands clasping the long end of it. As the light is getting a little dim, I ask the venerable heth-cropper if I am in the right direction for the village of F——, and how far I have to go before I can get there?

Very deliberately placing his pole on the ground

and resting the weight of his "heth" bundle on it, he peered out from underneath his eyes, winking and blinking. By no means dull eyes they were, like those of some old, pot-bellied dog-fox at the mouth of his earth, very wideawake, yet restless winkers. After he had looked me well over, with most exasperating deliberation he said, "I dessay as how you knows all about it."

I promptly assure him in the most emphatic manner that if I did know, I would not have stopped to ask him.

"Oh—ee—woudn't—eh?"

"No. Am I in the right road, if you please?"

"Well, I dun know ef ee be in right road er—no, but I ken tell ee one thing, if ee gets off this ere road, ee'l goo wrang."

Giving that aged fox-like winker a silent but hearty back-handed blessing, I left him with his "heth."

We certainly have "to goo off that 'ere road" for a considerable distance before we can get into the right one, the people themselves are a little bit hazy as to the locality of certain villages and hamlets which we would consider to be quite in their own neighbourhood. As to distance, one of their so-

called miles means two good honest ones. This appears to be one of the few unpleasant peculiarities of this very rustic population. After a course of questioning, we do at last reach the spot inquired for, but not a bit too soon. Thankful to rest for the night, we mentally resolve to clear out early next day and go farther afield. The morning is a bright and fresh one, and we jog further, making for the heart of this wild land. On a lonely road we pass two inns, or what in the old coaching days, when they ran from London to Portsmouth, used to be inns; now public-houses would be the correct name for them. There is one on each side of the road. That they have been there for very many years the exteriors plainly show. They have the look of past generations stamped on them. Directly opposite to the larger of these, divided by a narrow road only just wide enough to let two vehicles pass each other, stands a most incongruous-looking building, a brand-new, spick-and-span coffee-tavern, built in the so-called Gothic style, the outside woodwork painted with the latest æsthetic green colour. The plate-glass windows, the lower ones, were intended to be highly artistic. No words of mine could

adequately describe the oddness of the thing, the incongruity of that old-time inn and this new-time coffee-tavern facing each other. And then the two public-houses, with the coffee-tavern and three or four miserable-looking cottages, comprised all the buildings within sight. But the problem is, Was that coffee-tavern built by some well-meaning person with too much money, or by some company of total abstainers from London town? Good intentions go wrong at times, and moneyed people's fads there is no accounting for.

I spoke of the large size of all the fields, cultivated either for corn or hops, in the district we are passing over. These must of necessity employ a great amount of agricultural labour. The homes of the people may be scattered, but they are somewhere about. I know those who till the soil fairly well, and have been familiar with the class of agricultural labourers—a class distinctly by itself, with all its sturdy independence—from my boyhood. It is for that very reason—because I do know them so well—that I have so little to say about them in print. One thing I do know, they will never take kindly to coffee so called, or to coffee-taverns. In past times

the farmers' landlords were gentlemen of the old school. That school is, they say, broken up now—the more's the pity. Some who were trained in that old school are, we are happy to say, still left to us; but none too many, only enough to show those, of whom we have plenty, what they ought to be. One thing is evident, that from the time the tillers of the soil have had voting power in their hands, political philanthropists have been exceedingly anxious about their welfare—æsthetic coffee-taverns, to wit, *versus* the public-house. But I am also very certain that when once the agricultural labourer knows what he ought to do—he does not quite know this yet—he will do it and make no mistake about it.

When he does wake up, it will be to keep awake. If as a class the agricultural population appears easy to lead, it is only in appearance and due to the force of circumstances. The time may come when they will be leaders, but this is a question that will hardly bear thinking about by those who know the real state of the case.

Thinking passes the time away, and we find that we are nearing water. A bridge of considerable size is before us spanning a river, one that holds good

trout, if I am any judge of such matters, as I believe myself to be. Here it is a broad, pure, swift stream; so clear is it that we can see all the pebbles and weeds at the bottom, from the bridge, for a long distance up and down stream. This, I think, must be a branch of the Wey, rising in the eastern part of Hampshire, bordering on Surrey. If it were not so early in the spring we should expect to see some good fish rising here. The Wey, we know, holds good fish of a large size and of excellent quality where it has not been polluted, and it is pure here at any rate. A flock of green plovers or peewits are flapping and drifting over one rough field. No doubt they are going to nest there, or have nested, if their preparations for that purpose merit the name of nest. Appearances are very deceptive, as far as these birds are concerned, they have so many wiles of their own. One way of settling the matter is very sure; if you see a crow or rook struck down by peewits in a field, they are certain to be nesting there. Both crows and rooks rob peewits of their eggs in the most determined manner.

As we proceed the country gets wilder. If we wish to look for old churches and houses we must

look behind us in the direction whence we came. Low sand-banks are on either side of us, honey-combed with rabbit-holes, those of the pinmire "warmints" of this hungry land. About a mile through these low banks brings us to the firs and heather, and we are quite off the roads. Ragged, stunted firs, that look as if they had had much to contend with before they could grow at all, their stems covered with long grey moss, weird trees torn and ragged, reach mile after mile over hills and hollows, far away into the purple distance. A stiff breeze is blowing, carrying great mountains of silvery clouds, through the deep blue sky. There is a tone of sky-colouring which is seen at this time only, the early spring. But there is only a gentle drowsy hum here, for these stunted firs have no long arms to wave and mourn as the wind rushes through their needles. They are, as a rule, flat-topped, bristly trees, regular hedgehog firs. The heather is low, brown, and stunted, growing in solitary tufts and patches. Small dwarf birches show on any knob of sandy soil that may be about the size of a small table, with just enough twigs in each to make a garden broom of.

No bird-life is to be seen or heard, and I do not wonder at it. Even the rabbits are not to be found here. A little silver sand, slightly discoloured in places by dry, crumbly fir-needles, may be good for their digestive powers, considering what they have to feed on, but it will not fill their stomachs; so the rabbits avoid living on the belt of the firs where it is impossible to procure green food. One group of firs rises above the others in front of us, different from those we have passed through; fine trees these are and well shaped. The track we travelled over led up to them. We find that we have been ascending for some time, and on reaching them the matter is plain, these self-sown firs had a considerable extent of sandy loam to flourish in. The trees are clean stemmed, no grey moss is hanging from them, and as the sun is shining warm and bright just here, we go up to have a look round. Directly we reach the top, however, we slide down again; for under the trees there are small heaps of fir-cones pulled all to pieces, also a lot of the green tassel-shoots from the extreme end of the branches, some of them six and eight inches in length. It looks quite green under the trees, so many here scattered about. I

fancy that we are in luck, that we are going to watch a flock of crossbills feeding; so we creep and crawl all round, examining all the fir-branches, but to no purpose. Knowing the habits of the crossbill, that he uses both bill and feet in climbing, and that he is not at all particular in what position he hangs, we are patient, watching with our glasses, but not even a tit can we see. Presently we hear a slight rasping sound and a scale from a fir-cone falls, and peering round, we see a squirrel, not a crossbill, nibbling at a cone. He is not alone,—there is quite a small family of the little creatures in that clump of firs. I am disappointed a little, but the incident proves what large landed proprietors in Scotland have repeatedly stated, that the squirrel is very injurious to young fir-plantations. As concealment is no longer necessary, we at once minutely examine the heaps beneath the trees. The stems of the fir-cones are all sticky with turpentine resin, so are the outer scales of the stripped cones. They stick to our fingers when we pick them up. As to the tassels, the resin is oozing from the bitten part, where the animal's little ivory chisels had cut them from the branches. The resinous perfume from their wreck-

age is so strong that you might easily fancy turpentine had been thrown down there. Leaving the firs and the squirrels, we gain the top of this hill and travel downwards for a long distance, coming out on a flat extent of moorland bog. There is the bog for us to cross, then the hills again with their scrubby heather to climb, and then more fir-woods come. We find that there is a stiff jump in the shape of a water-course before we get on to the moor. This we clear all right, then our work commences in real earnest. To clear that bog without coming to grief is no easy matter, water shining underfoot and around the little bunches of bog-growth, perched on peat-hummocks. When you step on these, they topple over and break off, proving nothing but a snare and a delusion. I probe and poke with my good ash staff and then stand quite still and use my glasses, without which no one who studies wild life should ever stir out. What endless bother and trouble they save one! To the left we can see a line of white running right over the bog, on one side of it, which we cautiously make for. It proves to be a hard strip of white sand running through the bog, and passable when not overflowed by the water. We can see that

it has been covered quite recently. There are no signs of flourishing vegetation, only one or two cotton-grass bents here and there. No ragged ponies, no rough cows, not even a heth-cropper's donkey can we see, or a hut or low house; nor is there a bird to be seen or heard far or near. We are in the quiet of the wild brown moors: wild it is, but very beautiful, for we are face to face with some of the loveliest works of the Maker of all. Huge cloud-shadows flit over the moor and up and over the fir-covered hills opposite, then bright flashes of sun come out, lighting up the moor with silvery splashes and streaks where the water lies in the bog. To see a mountain of clouds throw their shadows over the hills, closely followed by light, appears to chase away all gloomy thoughts and morbid fancies. The young shoots of the fir-forest that clothe the hills show bright golden green in the light, warm light and purple grey in the shade, so that as you look, they appear like mighty waves of golden green and purple beating up and over the hills.

If only some creature would cry out, it would give some sense of life; but no curlew, plover, snipe, or blackcock is here. That bird-life is abundant in this

district I know well, but if it is seen just here, it is only when they are flying over. Certain districts are avoided by animals and birds, for reasons known to themselves only.

Once more we enter the firs, but this time it proves too much for us, though we fancy we can put up with something. The late Charles Kingsley found the same thing happen to him once. What we at a distance thought solid ground, proves to be a tussocky, or, as it is called here, a hummocky grass swamp, with firs growing over it. Disreputable objects the trees are, covered with the longest trailing grey moss I have ever seen. Even the sickly, spindly seedlings that had somehow managed to struggle through the tussocks are draped with it. If you caught up a great bunch, and pulled at it with both hands, you would pull up the knob of peat-soil that it grew on with it. We try this and in flows the water between all the hummocks, water the colour of coffee.

How many gripes we jump or blunder over through that abominable grass I am not able to say. We get lost in it. Places that we had not

the least intention of visiting begin to get near to us. So we turn, as we think, by the way we have come, jumping, blundering, and tripping through the moist desolation. After a bit we see light, and find ourselves on the open moor in quite a different direction from what we had expected. Here also we have to go through some kangaroo exercise before we can travel properly. In the distance on the moor a large cottage looms out, the only one we can see, so we make for that in order to seek information. Some children at play in the garden—a rough one it is, but still a garden —tell us we are seven miles from where we wish to go, seven miles over the hills, up and down through the heather, not under the firs. When we have gone about half the distance, in a hollow that we dip into suddenly we find a large piece of water, which is a mere or large pool in the wet season. This must be a paradise for all the waders that migrate backwards and forwards, surrounded as it is by the moors, treeless here and wild. There are no rushes, reeds, or water-lilies, only the water with a rim of white sand round it, just the very

racing-course for the waders. We are told by one we meet that this large sheet of water is "the little pond," that if we keep going over the hills, we shall find "the big pond." The one we have been looking at, according to his account, is only a duck-pond compared with the other. When we have almost given up all thoughts of seeing the "big pond," we come upon it so suddenly that it startles us. One turn round a sandy road places us in front of this mere. For many years—nay, from boyhood—the name of this place has been familiar to me. This pond has indeed a grand ornithological record that goes very far back. I do not for one moment imagine that one half of the birds procured here have been recorded, but even those that have been recorded make a fine list. The big pond is like the little one first seen by us, quite bare at the edges, and the hills that surround it are treeless. From one end to the other there is not enough cover to hide a teal, so far as rush or reed is concerned. There are no banks, the water and the moor-turf are level. As the water is perfectly pure and very clear, we can see the grass growing underneath it

for a long way out, not weeds, but bright green grass, on which we shall tread presently. Under the spring light it looks like a plain of silver. The breeze is blowing up the pond, causing a considerable wash, that we could hear very distinctly before we saw the water.

It is a noble bit of water. Perhaps I am not wrong in calling it one of those pieces which are styled in Scotland "a grassy loch." You might fancy it one, for all the surroundings are so appropriate, the brown moors and the firs. Over this water the osprey has wheeled and plunged; a fine spot it is for his fishing. He was very successful in his fishing, but so also was the sportsman who watched his sport, for the grand bird was shot in the act of eating a fish he had captured. Here also the great northern diver's yelling cry has rung out over the heather as he fished in the pond. Wary as the bird was, he never saw Christ Church Bay again, but ended his life here. More have been killed here since then, five all told. Rare waders visit the edges of this water, where they find all that they require; for it is more like some arm of the

sea running inland than what it really is—pure and fresh water. Fish of good size and quality live in it—pike, perch, carp, tench, and roach. I have seen a pike from the big pond that weighed fresh from the water 28 lb. No wonder the osprey, or fish-hawk, visited it. I have also seen a cormorant, a merganser, and one of the finest golden-eye drakes, pure in adult plumage, got from that pond. Gulls and terns also visit it; the common tern, the black tern, and the roseate or rosy tern, I have known all shot there, and seen the wild ducks and widgeon come in considerable numbers. From fifty to a hundred are seen on the water at one time, besides other fowl. But the rarest specimens, I think, go and come unseen. Although no cover for fowl is round the pond, the heather runs down to the edge of the water, in fact, in many places the water touches the roots. There is a thick grey dry moss mixed with the heather. The moss and heather appear about equally divided; rare cover it is for any wader to hide in. Any of the wild geese would be sure to take advantage of this sub-alpine cover, if they left the water voluntarily, which they frequently do,

after pitching down. The open nature of the water will not allow a boat to be used, not at any rate for fowl, unless it was a fowling-punt with punt-gun. From reliable information I gathered that the fowl when put up from the big pond take a line of flight from there to the little one, so called. To reach this they have to fly over a line of hills that divide two villages. Then many come to grief; for those who shoot know exactly where to place themselves, and where to go, as the fowl never deviate from their habit of flight—they always fly in one particular line. My informant told me he had recently shot a whooper on the pond with a rifle, hitting the bird clean through the head, and putting the skiff out for him afterwards; also, that he had repeatedly killed fowl on the pond, both duck and widgeon, when fired at to put them up. This statement we had not the least reason to doubt; for submerged grass must be the perfection of widgeon-food, and there is any amount of short, sweet grass close to the water's edge. Not one half of the birds shot are recorded; those who get them, and the wild sport inseparably connected with them, keep all

fowling localities, inland ones especially, to themselves. They are wise, and quite right also, in doing so. I told my courteous informant that I had been used to fowling on the shore, but that I certainly did expect to have seen some fowl on waters like this; to which he replied, "So you would, if I had not put them up from both ponds this morning. When they go they take others with them. It is when they leave the ponds, and when they come in, that we get them. We do not care about their being here in the daytime." As he had the right of shooting and fishing the ponds with some thousands of acres of the moorlands surrounding both of them, this gentleman was able to communicate much valuable information, which he freely gave, and for which I heartily thanked him. The reason that we had seen no fowl or bird was that we had, we found, been wandering all round his shooting-ground, from which he had already caused the fowl to be raised.

There are many large extents of water within a few miles of each other in this district. When raised from one, the fowl go direct to another,

without the least hesitation. If they find that matters do not suit them they make for the open sea, where they stay for a time, to return later on. The gentleman whom we met said there was good flight-shooting morning and evening, and that a great number of the birds never saw the tide again. When the red-deer roamed these wilds, many of the fowl bred here, and they would do so again if circumstances were in their favour. Even as it is, they come where others have come for ages before them; for, independently of its being within flight of tidal waters, it is within the limits of one of their ancient migrating lines. These lines, something tells them, they must ever follow. We do not know what this law is, for it is entirely beyond our knowledge. All the scientists in the world cannot read the riddle. Some unknown power tells them they must follow that particular line of migration or bird-travel, call it what you will, and they obey the behest, braving all weathers. Many of them, the large divers, drop down in the heather exhausted before their haven is reached. This is one of their resting-places on the way. As

the great northern diver and the black-throated diver are unable to walk, they push along on the thick feather cushions on their breasts, as a seal moves himself, and make good progress. They are capable of taking fish with the greatest ease; for their swimming powers under water surpass those of the fish they feed on, and swift of flight as they are when well on the wing—for they go at express speed — they are in reality out of their element on land.

In other papers I have stated that local names for fowl and names in scientific books on ornithology will not always agree. The same bird has different local names in different places. For instance, one out of many that I could mention, the golden-eye or golden-eyed pochard, is called here the black-headed duck. This is a very appropriate name. Those who are not practically acquainted with fowling would think that a bird the size of a duck, with magpie plumage, pure black and white, would be a most conspicuous object on the water; but it is not so, just the reverse, for the bird, like all divers, swims low in the water. When the bird is

in the hollow of the small waves that are generally seen here, the water being so much exposed, the feathers on his back are invisible. When he rises on the crest of the waves, his pure white breast falls in with the sparkling light; so that this bird, so conspicuous when in a case, is to all intents and purposes, when on the water, invisible, even with the aid of good glasses. Very frequently the fowler only knows he is near by his shooting from the water like a rocket, high up and far out of shot, and away.

There are old men living in the district we have visited that remember the last of the wild deer. The forest laws were keen in the old days, and they have been no less keen in the present century; But those who killed the deer without asking any man's permission had wits as keen as the forest laws that were made for their protection. Poor men have loved the wild deer equally as well as the Red King did, who lost his life hunting by a deer-arrow. The whole of this country was at one time a vast deer-forest, reaching from Hampshire to Surrey and Sussex. It is deer-country, it has

always been such from the earliest records; and it would be this again if deer were permitted to live here. I have heard a little about deer-poaching in this land of fir and heather, and I hope to learn more about it. I hope also, when the cotton-grass blooms, to listen to the crooning of blackcock and the bleat of snipe in this same wild region.

THE END.

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